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COLLECTION
OF
BRITISH AUTHORS

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 2357.

A FAMILY AFFAIR BY HUGH CONWAY

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. 1.

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.

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VOL. I.

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TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

By the same Author,

CALLED BACK	1 vol.
BOUND TOGETHER	2 vols.
DARK DAYS	1 vol.

A

FAMILY AFFAIR.

A NOVEL.

BY

HUGH CONWAY

(F. J. FARGUS),

AUTHOR OF "CALLED BACK," "DARK DAYS," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1885.

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A FAMILY AFFAIR.

CHAPTER I.

A LITTLE DERELICT.

It was a dreary, dismal, wintry afternoon. All the lights of Paddington Station were needed to conquer the damp fog which filled the arched expanse from end to end. The broad platform teemed with the motion and bustle attendant upon the departure of a train. The newspaper boys alone were having a comparatively dull time of it, as the first act of every passenger, upon taking his seat, was to pull up the window, and shut out as much fog as possible, declining to let the sash down for any one, except other travellers, who, having paid their fares, claimed their right to seats in the train —a proceeding which, to the first installed passenger, always seems supremely selfish. The new comer, or comers, might choose some other compartment than his!

The moving rack which bears the lamps reached the extreme end of the train. The strong-armed official below hurled the last crystal globe to the nimble official who runs along the top of the carriages, and leaps so recklessly from one to another. Deft as an Indian juggler, he caught the gleaming missile, slapped it into the last socket, and sprang incontinently from the already moving train. The guard shut the last door which somebody's carelessness had left open, jumped into his van as it swept by him, and, punctual to the minute, the five o'clock train left London, and began its race to Penzance.

In one of the first-class compartments were three passengers, although the railway company would only benefit to the extent of two fares; one of these passengers being a child still young enough to be passed off as a child in arms by all, save, perhaps, those tender-minded persons who send conscience-money to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The two travellers who augmented the company's revenue were a man and a woman.

That they were strangers was evident, and it was also evident that the man was an old traveller. As soon as the train was in motion, and he felt insured for some time to come against disturbance, he arranged his wraps in the most approved fashion, donned a soft cap, lit a lamp, and buried himself

in a book. He was a young man; but as he appears in this tale only to disappear, a detailed description would be superfluous. It is enough to know he was a gentleman, well dressed, well-to-do in appearance, and looked quite in his proper place in a first-class carriage.

It was a different matter with the woman. There was no obvious reason why she should not be able and willing to pay threepence-halfpenny instead of a penny a mile for the privilege of being whisked to her destination; yet one could imagine a crusty old director, who travels free himself, and is therefore anxious to prevent the company from being defrauded, calling to a guard and suggesting that the woman's ticket should be examined. Or, from purely benevolent reasons, a person who knows what mistakes women make in such matters might, with propriety, have remarked, "How comfortable these first-class carriages are." For my part, I should most certainly have done so—not from benevolence; but to save myself, who had paid just fare, from feeling swindled if, at the journey's end, a good-natured ticket-collector let off the victim of such a comfortable mistake.

Yet there was nothing remarkable in the woman's appearance, except the utter absence of individuality it displayed. For any guidance her

looks gave, she might have been rich or poor, young or old, beautiful or ugly, noble or simple. Had her travelling companion been as curious as he was at present indifferent about the matter, he might have sat opposite to her from London to the Land's End, yet not have known how to classify her. She was dressed in plain black—and black, like charity and night, covereth and hideth much. No scrap of bright ribbon, no vestige of colour, broke the sombre monotony of her attire, and a thick black veil hid the upper part of her face. She sat like one in a thoughtful frame of mind. Her head was bent forward, and so threw her mouth and chin into the shade. Her hands being gloved, it was impossible to know whether she wore a wedding ring or not.

Of the child, a little boy, there was nothing that could be seen except a mass of bright golden hair. The woman had wound a thick woollen shawl around him, and held him close to her bosom. He was no annoyance to any one, for, shortly after the train started, he fell fast asleep. Indeed, so inoffensive were his travelling companions, that the gentleman, who had felt somewhat disgusted when a woman and a child entered the compartment, began to hope that, after all, he need not shift his quarters at the first stoppage.

The train sped on through the white fog. It was a fast train, but not so fast as to give itself airs and decline stopping more than twice in a hundred miles. Near Reading the speed slackened. The gentleman with the book breathed an inward prayer that he might not be disturbed. He did not notice that, as the train drew up at the platform, the woman half rose from her seat, as if her journey was at an end; then, after a moment's hesitation, reseated herself in her former attitude. The travellers were not disturbed. The train shot on once more. Still the gentleman read his book —still the silent woman held the sleeping child.

In less than half an hour Didcot was reached. The woman, after a quick glance, to assure herself that the reader was intent upon his book, pressed her lips upon the child's golden head, and kept them there until the train stopped. For a minute or two she remained motionless, then, laying the child on the seat, rose quickly and opened the carriage door. The reader looked up as the cold, damp air rushed into the heated compartment.

"You have no time to get out," he said; "we are off in a minute."

If she heard the well-meant caution, she paid no heed to it. She made no reply, but, stepping on to the platform, closed the carriage door behind

her. The young man shrugged his shoulders, and resumed his interrupted paragraph. It was no business of his if a stupid woman chose to risk missing the train.

Although, two minutes afterwards, when he found the train in rapid motion, and himself and the sleeping child the only tenants of the compartment, he saw that, after all, he was primarily concerned in the matter. In spite of his warning, the mother had been left behind, and he was in the unenviable position of having a child thrown upon his hands until the next stoppage.

Although he was a bachelor, and one who knew nothing of the ways of children, he scarcely felt justified in pulling the emergency cord. Swindon would be reached in less than an hour—there he would be relieved. So he could do no more than anathematise the careless mother, and pray that the child's slumbers might be unbroken. Whatever effect the objurgation may have had, he soon saw that his prayer was not to be granted. The child, no doubt missing its protector's embrace, opened its eyes and began to struggle. It would have rolled off the seat, had not its enforced guardian, who was a good-natured, kind-hearted young fellow, picked it up and transferred it to his knee.

He meant well, although he did not handle it

very skilfully. A man must go through a course of painful experiences before he learns how to dandle a child properly. Our friend did his best, but so clumsily that the woollen shawl fell from the child, and disclosed a large ticket sewn on to the dress beneath. On it was written, "H. Talbert, Esq., Hazlewood House, Oakbury, near Blacktown." The young man applauded the good sense which had provided for a contingency which had really come to pass. Then he settled down to do the best he could towards supplying the place of the missing woman until the stoppage at Swindon might bring deliverance.

Swindon at last. Here the ill-used traveller called the guard, and, as that official is of course paid to undertake all sorts of delicate and unforeseen duties, with perfect fairness shifted all further responsibility on to his shoulders, resumed the perusal of his book, and troubled no more about the matter.

The guard, without disputing his position of guardian to all unprotected travellers, hardly knew what to do in the present emergency. The hope that the foolish mother had managed to get into another carriage was dispelled by her not making her appearance. He was also puzzled by the careful way in which the child was labelled. This guard

had seen some curious things in his time, and, as the missing woman had left not a scrap of luggage behind, thought it not improbable that the desertion of the child was due to intention, not accident. At first he thought of leaving the tiny derelict at Swindon, on the chance that the mother would arrive by the next train from Didcot. But the more he thought the matter over the more convinced he felt that no mother would arrive by the next or any following train. Being himself a family man, and feeling most kindly disposed towards the little golden head which nestled in the most confiding way against his great brown beard, he decided to take the child on to Blacktown and thence forward it as addressed. He pulled a couple of cushions out of a first-class carriage, put them in one corner of his van, and tucked up little Golden-head as snugly as any mother could have done; so snugly and comfortably that the child at once closed its blue eyes, and slept until the train reached Blacktown.

There the guard carried the little fellow into the refreshment-room, and, leaving him in charge of the pleasant young ladies, went to look for a sober yet speculative man who would take the child to Oakbury on the chance of being paid for his trouble. He even gave this man half-a-crown—to

be repaid out of his prospective reward—for cab-hire. Then, after another look at the little waif, who was drinking milk, munching a biscuit, and being made very much of by the refreshment-room young ladies, our guard rushed back to his some-what neglected duties, and was soon spinning down west at the rate of thirty-five miles an hour.

CHAPTER II.

A FAMILY OF POSITION.

Be it remembered that Oakbury is not Blacktown. Many of his inhabitants are greatly annoyed when they hear it called a suburb of Blacktown. Oakbury is near the large city, but not of it. Although the fact cannot be ignored that the existence of the many charming country-houses which adorn Oakbury is as much due to its contiguity to the dirty thriving town as to its natural beauties—and although a certain proportion of those desirable residences has been purchased by Blacktown's successful traders—the most aristocratic inhabitants of Oakbury look with indifference on the good and evil fortunes of the city. They, the aristocratic inhabitants, are useful to Blacktown, not Blacktown to them. They are out of its dissensions and struggles; better still, beyond the range of its taxation. They are of the county, not the town. So they head their letters, "Oakbury, Westshire;" and, as a rule, decline intimacy with any Blacktown

trader under the rank of banker or merchant prince.

Besides Lord Kelston's well-known country-seat, there must be in the parish of Oakbury some twenty or twenty-five gentlemen's residences. They cannot be called estates, as the ground attached to each varies respectively from three to fifty acres, but not a few of them might lay claim to be described by that well-rounded phrase, dear to auctioneers and house agents, "a country mansion, fit for the occupation and requirements of a family of position." They are not new, speculative, jerry-built houses, but good, old-fashioned, solid affairs. No painted and gilt railings surround them; thick boundary walls and fine old trees hide them from the gaze of inquisitive holiday folks. As the country around is very beautiful and richly timbered; as the prevailing wind which blows across Oakbury comes straight from the sea, pure and uncontaminated; as two of the best packs of hounds in England meet within an easy distance; and, prejudice notwithstanding, as the conveniences offered by a large city are so close at hand—it is no wonder that the rector of Oakbury numbers many families of position among his parishioners. If mine were a family of position, it should most certainly occupy a pew in that fine old square-towered church.

After this description it will be easily believed that the Oakbury people are somewhat exclusive—by the Oakbury people are meant the inhabitants of the aforesaid twenty houses: the manners of the villagers and other small fry who constitute the residue of the population need not be taken into account. The Oakbury people proper are very particular as to with whom they associate, and the most particular and exclusive of all are two gentlemen named Talbert, the joint owners and occupiers of Hazlewood House.

Their ultra-exclusiveness was but the natural outcome of the position in which they were placed. The fact that their income was derived from money made by their father in timber, tobacco, soap, sugar, or some other large industry of Blacktown—people have already nearly forgotten which it was—must be responsible for the care the Talberts were bound to exercise before they made a new acquaintance.

Because, you see, in their opinion at least, the taint of trade still clung to them. They were but a generation removed from the actual buying, selling, and chaffering. Metaphorically speaking, their own father's hands had been hardened by the timber, stained by the tobacco, lathered by the soap, made sticky by the sugar, according to the particular branch of trade at which he had worked to such

advantage. So it was that upon attaining the earliest years of discretion, the sons decided that it was more incumbent upon them than upon the generality of persons to be peculiarly particular in their choice of friends. As they were amiable, right-feeling young men, they looked upon this duty as a sad necessity.

Had they been tempted to swerve from this line of conduct, respect for their father should have kept them steadfast. He had always impressed the great duty upon them. Before the two boys were out of the nursery, the great *coup* which is expected by every sanguine business man came off. Mr. Talbert realised his capital and sold his business. He obtained less for it because he made the stipulation that his name should no longer appear in connection with it. Then, a widower with one daughter and two sons, he bought Hazlewood House, and settled down to drift gradually into good society.

He educated his children by this creed. It is the duty of all people to rise in the world—both in commercial and social circles. Thanks to his exertions and good fortune, the first half of the obligation had been discharged. The second rested chiefly with his children. He did not tell them this in definite words, but all the same preached it to them most eloquently, and was more than content, and

felt that the fruits of his training were showing themselves, when his daughter married Sir Maingay Clauson, a fairly respectable and well-to-do baronet.

This satisfactory alliance gave the Talberts a lift in the social scale; although, so far as Oakbury was concerned, it was little needed. Mr. Talbert had now been out of business for at least ten years. He was quiet, gentlemanly, and, if not retiring, at least unobtrusive. His wealth was estimated at about three times its correct amount. With these advantages he already found himself well received by the families of position, his neighbours. Content as he no doubt felt on his own account, he, nevertheless, held up their sister's brilliant match as an example to his sons, and talked so much about the necessity of their choosing their intimates fittingly that it is marvel the young men did not speedily develop into fools or snobs.

But even now when verging upon middle age they were neither—although any man who would decline your acquaintance, or mine, ought, of course, to be one or the other, perhaps both. The worst that could be urged against the Talberts was this. From the very first they had told themselves: "We can find as pleasant and as true friends among the upper ten thousand—among those who do not make

their living by barter—as we can among commercial people. Let us therefore only associate with the best. A man has an undoubted right to choose his own friends. We shall not go out of our way to toady the great, but with our ideas on the subject we can only make associates of those whom we consider the proper class of people. A Duke of Badminton may associate with whomsoever he chooses. He is always, *per se*, the duke. We are not dukes. Our father made his money in—well, never mind in what. We are not even millionnaires. We have enough wealth to live comfortably and like gentlemen, but not enough to roll in. If we go hand in glove with oil, tobacco, corn, sugar, &c., we must, on account of the narrow distance which divides us from the status of commerce, sink to the level, or at least get confounded with those useful, respectable, profitable, but, to us, distasteful commodities. Therefore it behoves us to be fastidious even to a fault."

Who can blame such sentiments as these? To my mind there is a kind of shrewd nobility in them!

Why, with such sensible views on things in general, the two young men did not follow their sister's example and make brilliant matches, is a matter which has never been clearly explained.

When, after an immaculate career, they left Oxford, they were tall, well-built young fellows; moreover carrying about them an inherent look of distinction. So far as the world knew they had no vices. Indeed, in spite of stature, good looks, and broad shoulders, in some quarters they were accounted milksops. Perhaps because, in addition to the polite, even courtly, style which they strove to adopt towards every one, they had many little finnicking, old-maidish ways which were a source of merriment to their contemporaries. Nevertheless, among those who were honoured with their friendship, the Talberts were not unpopular. With many women—the middle-aged especially — these tall, handsome refined young men were prime favourites. The fact of the brothers having reached the respective ages of forty and forty-one without having selected helps-meet for them argues that something which makes a marrying man was missing from their natures.

It may be that the pleasure they found in travel prevented their settling down. For many years, either together or singly, the Talberts spent nine months out of the twelve away from home. Their father, who had no wish to see his sons striving in the ruck of humanity for the world's prizes, made them handsome allowances. Greatly to their credit

they lived within their incomes, even saved money. These savings they invariably invested in works of art, so that as years went by their acquisitions if united would have formed a valuable and tasteful collection, the units of which had been culled from east, west, north, and south—so judiciously that the brothers felt sure that, if such a thing were needed, the selection would enhance the reputation they already enjoyed for refined tastes and knowledge of matters artistic.

The brothers were the best of friends. They understood and sympathised with each other's likes, dislikes, and weaknesses. Only once in their lives had they quarrelled, but that quarrel had lasted for six years. They shudder now as they look back upon that time.

It was no vulgar dispute, which is made known to all the world and in which mutual friends are expected to take sides. It was only the Talberts themselves who knew that a quarrel existed. To outsiders they seemed more absurdly polite to each other than before.

The cause of the quarrel was the interference of one brother in the other's affairs. They were peculiar men, and very tenacious of the Englishman's duty of minding his own business. On a certain occasion one of them fancied a rather deli-

cate matter as much his own business as his brother's. He was mistaken. They did not use high words, because such things were not in their line; but each brother was sadly firm. The upshot was that for six years they only spoke when they met in society.

At last old Talbert died. His successful daughter had been dead a long time. The old man left Hazlewood House and its contents to his sons conjointly. The rest of his fortune he divided into three parts, and left in this proportion to each of his children or their children, if any. Then the sons met at Hazlewood House and considered what they should do.

First of all, as was becoming, they made up their differences. Very little was said on either side, but it was understood that cordial relations were re-established. At which happy conclusion each man rejoiced greatly—the six years' separation had been a terrible affair—and tacitly registered a vow that for the future his brother's affairs should be his own, distinct, private property.

By this time our friends had grown rather weary of gadding about. Moreover, it was due to their position that some place should be called their home. For nearly twenty years they had lived in the various capitals of Europe, and they knew that

they had conquered society. Indeed it is doubtful whether any two men, not celebrities, were better known than Horace and Herbert Talbert. So they resolved to settle down and begin housekeeping on their own account.

They collected their art treasures, and being, not traders, but still thorough men of business, in order to save any question arising in a remote future, made exact inventories of their respective belongings, down to the uttermost, smallest, and most cracked cup and saucer. Then they combined their collections, and made Hazlewood House curiously beautiful with paintings, china, and bric-à-brac. This done, they settled down into quiet domestic life, and kept their house as methodically and carefully, and no doubt a great deal better than any two old women could have done.

Of course, with their cultivated tastes, their general acquirements, their cosmopolitan experiences, and the many desirable friends they were known to possess, the Talberts' standing in Oakbury was undeniable. They were a credit to the neighbourhood, and might, had they not been too good-hearted to dream of such a proceeding, have snubbed any one of the families of position without dreading reprisals. If people laughed at their womanish ways, effeminate proceedings, and domestic economies, they

were, nevertheless, always glad to entertain or to be entertained by the Talberts. The latter need not be wondered at. The little dinners at Hazlewood House were the pink of culinary civilisation—the crystallisation of refined gastronomic intelligence.

CHAPTER III.

AN ARGUMENT AND AN ARRIVAL.

On the night when the down-train carried the golden-headed child to Blacktown, the Talberts had dined at home, without company. The two men were still at the table, sipping their claret and smoking cigarettes. They were neither great drinking men nor great smoking men. If such habits are sins, the Talberts might have gone on as they were going for many years, and then made atonement very easily. It is needless to state that the two brothers were faultlessly dressed in the evening garb of the nineteenth century. It will also be guessed that the dinner-table was most tastefully laid out. In spite of the season being mid-winter, it was gay with flowers. Quaint antique silver spoons and forks did the duty which is exacted from the florid king's pattern and the ugly fiddle pattern abominations of our day. The napery was of the whitest and finest description. The polish on the glass such as to make the most careful

housewife or conscientious servant wonder and envy. There is a tale connected with the glass.

Once upon a time a lady who was dining at Hazlewood House, asked her hosts, with pardonable curiosity, how they were able to induce their servants to send the decanters and wine glasses to the table in such a glorious state of refulgency. Horace Talbert smiled, and answered with exquisite simplicity—

"We should never think of trusting our glass to the hands of servants. My brother and I see to it ourselves."

Thereupon the lady, who had marriageable sisters, and was no doubt keenly alive to the fact that her hosts were eligible bachelors, said, "It was very sweet of them to take so much trouble;" but her husband, who heard the question and the answer, burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. His was a low, coarse, commonplace mind, utterly unable to divest the ideal from the material. To such a grovelling nature the picture of these two six-feet brawny men washing and rubbing their rare and costly glass seemed intensely comical.

The Talberts showed no sign of annoyance; they even smiled gravely in response to his vulgar mirth; but Hazlewood House knew that person no more.

But the wretch took his revenge after the manner of his kind. Unluckily, in spite of his faults, his position in the county was not to be despised, and more unluckily he possessed a certain amount of humour of the low class. He was brutal enough to nickname our friends the "Tabbies," and, appropriate or not, the name clung to them, and will cling for ever and ever. This is but another proof of how careful a man should be in the selection of his friends.

Although to-night the glass was as radiant as ever, there was at present no one to admire it save its owners and caretakers. By virtue of his year of seniority, Horace Talbert sat at the head of the table. Herbert was at his right hand. The two brothers were strangely alike both in figure and face. They were brown-haired men, with long straight noses, calm, serious eyes, rather arched eyebrows, and average foreheads. Each wore a well-kept beard and moustache, the beard clipped close, and terminating in a point at the chin—a fashion which suited their long oval faces remarkably well, and, perhaps, added a kind of old-world courtliness to their general appearance. Their looks may be summed up by saying that the Talberts were men who one felt ought to possess a picture gallery of distinguished ancestors. The absence of

such a desirable possession seemed a heartless freak of nature.

The room in which the brothers were sitting was furnished with a bold mixture of modern and antique. Where comfort and utility were the first considerations, the modern prevailed; where ornament or decoration had to be supplied, the antique, often the grotesque antique, was called into requisition. On the high carved mantelpiece stood Oriental bronze vases with hideous dragons creeping round them, and gaping, grinning kylins, who looked mockingly and fearlessly at the fierce metal monsters. They knew—old china figures know more than people suspect—that the dragons were welded to their vases more irrefrangibly than Prometheus to his rock.

Here and there was a plate of rich coloured *cloissonné* enamel, a piece of Nankin china, a specimen of old brass work, a bracket of *real* old carved oak, an antique lamp, or some other article dear to the collector. Some half a dozen medium-sized but valuable paintings hung upon the walls. The floor was covered by a sober-hued Persian carpet, and, of course, a roaring fire filled the grate.

The Talberts looked very grave—as grave and solemn as Roman fathers in high debate. They

were, indeed, discussing a weighty matter. After an interval of silence, Herbert rose, and walked to his brother's side. The two looked critically down the table. They went to the bottom and looked up the table. They went to the sides and looked across the table; they even sent glances diagonally from corner to corner.

"It is certainly a great improvement," said Horace with quiet triumph.

"A great improvement," echoed the other. "Echo" is the right word—even their voices were alike.

In a contented frame of mind they resumed their seats, their claret, and their cigarettes. The great improvement was this:—

For some time past these excellent housekeepers had been sorely exercised by the conventional way in which laundresses fold table-cloths. They did not like the appearance of the three long creases on the snowy expanse. They turned their inventive abilities to account, and a week ago walked down to the residence, redolent of soap and hot water, of the woman who did their washing, and startled the poor creature out of her wits by insisting upon their table-cloths being folded in a new and improved fashion. They even demon-

strated their meaning by a practical experiment, and so impressed the nymph of the wash-tub and mangle with the importance they attached to the matter, that she had actually managed to learn her lesson well enough for the result of their teaching to give them great satisfaction.

Coffee was brought in, and the two gentlemen were about to leave the dining-room, when the Rev. Mr. Mordle was announced. Mr. Mordle was the curate of Oakbury, and always a welcome guest at Hazlewood House. It was an unspoken axiom of the Talberts that the Church set the seal of fitness upon her servants, or, at least, upon her upper servants. Organ blowers, parish clerks, and pew openers were the lower servants—so, all things being equal, a clergyman could always break through the exclusiveness which reigned at Hazlewood House. Mr. Mordle was clever in his way, full of talk, and of course knew every in and out of the parish, in the administration to the wants of which he must have found the Talberts a great assistance. All great men have their weaknesses—perhaps their friendship for Mr. Mordle was the Talberts' weakness. But then they dearly loved having a finger in the pie parochial, leaving out of the question the fact that they liked the curate, and in the kindness of their hearts pitied his loneliness.

So he often dropped in like this, uninvited, and no doubt felt the privilege to be a great honour.

On Mr. Mordle's side, he could thoroughly appreciate humour, the more so when its existence was quite unsuspected by the sedate humourist. To him the study of Horace and Herbert was a matter of keen and enduring delight.

They rose and greeted him. "Excuse me," said Horace rather nervously, "did——"

"Yes, I did," answered the curate briskly. "I rubbed them—I scrubbed them—my feet feel red-hot. I could dance a minuet on your table-cloth without soiling it."

The redundancy of the answer set their minds at rest. The bugbear of their domestic lives was persons entering their rooms without having first wiped their shoes as every Christian gentleman should. The hall door was so heavily armed with mats and scrapers that such an omission seemed an impossibility. Yet sometimes it did occur, and its effects were terrible—almost tragic.

Horace rang for more claret; Herbert passed his cigarette case, and the three men chatted for a while on various subjects. Presently said Horace with sad decision:

"Ann Jenkins came to us the day before yester-

day. She told a piteous tale. We gave her five shillings."

"Very good of you," said the curate; "she has a long family—nine, I think."

"Yes; but we are sorry now that we gave the money. We are sure she is not a careful, thrifty woman."

The curate's eyes twinkled. He knew Ann Jenkins well—too well.

"Careful and thrifty people wouldn't want your half-crowns. But how did you find out her true character?"

Mr. Mordle expected to hear a mournful account of a domiciliary visit to Ann Jenkins, and a dissertation upon the various and almost original stages of untidiness in which his friends had found her numerous progeny. But the truth was better than he had bargained for.

"We walked behind her across the field this morning," said Horace with grave regret. "When she got over the stile we saw she had on two odd stockings, a black one and a grey one—or blue and grey, I am not certain which."

"Blue and grey," said Herbert. "I noticed particularly."

"Her tastes, like yours," said the curate, "may be cultured enough to avoid Philistinic uniformity."

"Oh dear, no," said Herbert seriously. "We argue in this way. The woman has two pairs of stockings——"

"I doubt it," said the curate. "But, never mind—go on." His friends were surpassing themselves!

"She has two pairs—one grey, the other blue or black. She has worn one stocking into holes. Instead of sitting down and darning it, like a decent body, she simply puts on one of the other pair."

"Why doesn't she put on the other pair altogether?" asked Mr. Mordle.

"Because," said Horace triumphantly, "one stocking of that pair is in the same dilapidated condition: so her conduct is doubly bad. As I said, she is not a deserving woman."

"Granting your premises," said Mr. Mordle, "your argument is not illogical. Your reasoning appears sound, your deductions correct. But——"

The curate was preparing for a delicious battle on the subject, well worn or otherwise, of Ann Jenkins's hose. He meant to learn why one stocking of either pair should wear out before its fellow, and many other fanciful combinations were forming themselves in his subtle brain, when the interest in the mended or unmended stockings was ex-

tinguished by the entrance of the Talberts' irreproachable-looking man-servant. He informed his masters that the man had brought the child.

"What man? What child?" asked Horace. "Do you expect a man or a child, Herbert?"

"Certainly not. What do you mean, Whittaker?"

"A railway man has brought a child, sir. He says it is to be left here."

"There must be some stupid mistake."

"No doubt, sir," said Whittaker respectfully, but showing that his opinion quite coincided with his masters'.

"Where is the man?" asked Horace.

"In the hall, sir."

"Did he wipe his shoes?" asked Herbert in dread.

"Certainly, sir; I insisted upon his doing so."

"We had better see the stupid man and set the matter right," said Horace. "Excuse us for a moment, Mr. Mordle."

The two tall men walked into the hall, leaving Mr. Mordle to chuckle at his ease. Hazlewood House was certainly a most interesting place this evening. It was lucky for the curate that he indulged in his merriment with his face turned from the door, as in a minute the respectable Whittaker

entered the room. That functionary was most tenacious that due respect should be shown to his masters. Most probably the look of vivid amusement on Mr. Mordle's features would, had he seen it, have made an enemy for life of the faithful Whittaker.

"Mr. Talbert and Mr. Herbert would be glad if you would step out for a moment, sir."

Thereupon Mr. Mordle went into the hall and saw a most comical sight—the solemnity of the actors concerned not being the least comical part of it. Standing sheepishly on the door mat, or rather on one of the legion of door mats, was a stolid-faced porter in his uniform of brown fustian, velveteen, or whatever they call the stuff. On either side of the massive oblong hall-table stood one of the Talberts, whilst between them, on the table itself, was a child with a mass of tumbled, flossy golden hair streaming down from under a natty little cap. Horace and Herbert, each armed with his horn-rimmed eye-glass, and with looks of utter consternation and bewilderment upon their faces, were bending down and inspecting the child.

To Mr. Mordle's imaginative mind, the group suggested a picture he had once seen of the Brobdignagians taking stock of Gulliver: nor could the picture have been in any way spoiled when he

himself, a tall man, went to one end of the table, whilst Whittaker, another tall man, stood at a becoming distance from the other end, and joined in the scrutiny of the diminutive stranger.

"This is a most extraordinary thing!" said Horace. "The child is sent by rail addressed here."

Mr. Mordle read the ticket: "H. Talbert, Esq., Hazlewood House, Oakbury, near Blacktown."

"Where did you say it came from?" asked Herbert, turning to the stolid-faced porter. "Let us hear all about it again."

"Guard of five o'clock down, gentlemen; he says child was left in first-class carriage. Mother got out at Didcot, and missed the train or didn't come back. Guard told me to get cab and bring the child here. Said I'd be paid well for my trouble. Cab was three and six, gentlemen."

"There must be some mistake. What are we to do?" asked the brothers.

"Don't expect any visitors, I suppose?" asked the curate.

"None whatever. You must take the child away again," said Horace, turning to the porter. The man gaped.

"What am I to do with it, sir?" he asked.

"Lost parcels office," suggested Mr. Mordle

quietly. Whittaker gave him a reproachful look. The matter was too serious a one for jest.

"Cut the label off," was the curate's next piece of advice. "There may be a letter under it."

They took it off. The label was a piece of writing-paper gummed on to a plain card which had been torn or cut irregularly. No letter was concealed beneath it. Then they searched the pockets of the child's little coat, but found nothing. Their perplexity increased.

"I'll wish you good evening, gentlemen," said the porter. "Cab was three and six." The "Tabbies" were on the horns of a dilemma. The eyes which could detect the discrepancy in the unfortunate Mrs. Jenkins's stockings were able to see that the baby was well, even very well, clad. It was just possible that a letter had miscarried—possible that some one was coming to Hazlewood House without invitation or notice—that she had really missed the train at Didcot; that she would arrive in the course of an hour or two and explain matters. The safest plan was to keep the child for a while.

Having settled this, Horace fished five shillings out of his pocket and sent the porter away happy. Thereupon Herbert produced a half-crown which he handed to his brother, who pocketed it without comment and as a matter of course. They were

not miserly men, but made a point of being just and exact in their dealings with one another down to the uttermost farthing. Much annoyance would be saved if all men were the same as the Talberts with respect to small sums. Nevertheless, this rigid adjustment of matters pecuniary was a trait in their characters which greatly tickled Mr. Mordle.

All the while the little boy, with fat sturdy legs placed well apart, stood upon the great oak hall-table. The lantern of many-coloured glass over his head threw rich warm tints on his sunny hair. He seemed in no way shy or terrified; indeed, if any fault could be found in his bearing, it was that his manners were more familiar than such a short acquaintance justified. As the dignified brothers once more bent over him to resume their examination, he seized Mr. Herbert's watch chain in his chubby fist and laughed delightedly — a laugh which Mr. Mordle echoed. He had long looked for a suitable excuse for expressing his feelings in this way. The situation was so funny. An unknown child foisted upon his friends at this hour of the night! No dirty beggar's brat, but a pretty, well-dressed little boy, old enough to possess a row of tiny white teeth, but not, it seemed, old enough to give any explanation of this unwarrantable intrusion. The child had such large,

bright blue eyes, such wonderful golden hair, such fearless and confident ways, that Herbert, who was fond of children, patted the bright head and pulled out his watch that the little rascal might hear it tick; whilst Mordle slipped back to the dining-room and returned with a couple of unwholesome macaroons.

"Nearest way to a child's heart through the stomach," he said, as the youngster deserted his first friend for the sake of the sweets.

Horace eyed these advances discontentedly. "But what is to be done?" he said.

Just then the muffled strains of a piano passed through the closed door of the drawing-room.

"I should think," said the curate, "you had better take Miss Clauson's advice on the subject."

CHAPTER IV.

BEATRICE'S PROPOSAL.

In describing Hazlewood House and its belongings, no mention has been made of Miss Clauson, for this reason—her position in that well-regulated establishment was, as yet, scarcely defined. She was neither mistress nor guest. She was in short the only daughter—indeed, the only surviving result of that brilliant marriage made by Miss Talbert when she allied herself with Sir Maingay Clauson, Bart.

There is no reason for enlarging upon the admirable way in which Lady Clauson filled the position which her own merits had gained, or to which Fate had assigned her. Socially and domestically —in the outward as well as the inward life—she was all a baronet's wife should be—all save that she presented her husband with no heir to his title and estates. This was a sad omission, but, for the sake of her many other good qualities, Sir Maingay overlooked it, and made her a very good husband as husbands go. When Lady Clauson died, some

twelve years after the birth of the daughter who lived, Sir Maingay wept copiously. He even opened his Bible—the first time for many years—and by the aid of *Cruden's Concordance*, looked out a text appropriate to her many virtues. Moreover, for her sake, or his own, he remained single for five long years. Then he went the way of all middle-aged, titled, wife-bereft flesh, and married again.

Beatrice Clauson, just about to leave school, a romantic young lady, whose head for the present was, however, only occupied by pretty, filial dreams of looking after her father, ministering to his comforts, ruling his house, and generally doing the best she could to fill the place of her dead mother, found herself without a word of warning presented to a new mother, one, moreover, but four years older than herself. It was a crushing blow! It was a girl's first lesson in the vanity and unstability of mundane expectations.

She ought, of course, to have anticipated it; but she was young, and like most young people, considered her middle-aged father abnormally old and staid. Besides, she could remember her own mother well enough, and remembered also Sir Maingay's sincere grief when death claimed his wife. She remembered the way in which the weeping man threw his arms around herself, and told her that

she was now his ALL—his treasured memento of his wife—his one tie to life. Recalling all this, she was sanguine enough to fancy that memory was even more vivid, that grief had graven its lines deeper with her father than with herself. So the bolt came from the bluest of the blue!

At seventeen Beatrice Clauson was still a spoiled child. All distracted widowers, until they marry again, spoil an only child; therefore, if only on salutary grounds, a second alliance is to be recommended. We will, then, take it for granted that at the time of Sir Maingay's second marriage, Miss Clauson was spoiled. Moreover, we may at least suspect, that she was both impetuous and stubborn, headstrong and romantic; also in her own way as proud as Lucifer.

The second Lady Clauson was a beauty, and nothing more. Her family was what is called respectable—a term, the signification of which no man or woman has as yet been able exactly to define. Like the Bible, we interpret it as we choose.

When the enforced meeting between Lady Clauson and her step-daughter took place, the young lady, by means of those signs and tokens, the masonry of which women alone fully com-

prehend, showed the state of her mind so clearly, that war to the knife was then and there declared.

And civil war in families—baronets or otherwise—is a deplorable thing: doubly deplorable for the neutral parties, who lack the excitement of the internecine combat. For a while Sir Maingay's life was anything but a happy one.

It matters little who was most to blame—the girl for her unreasonableness and stubborn spirit, and want of resignation to the inevitable—Lady Clauson for retaliating with all an injured woman's pettiness and spite—Sir Maingay for the thoroughly man-like conduct in letting things drift. They did drift with a vengeance! The breach between the two ladies soon became too enormous to be bridged over by any family diplomatic engineering.

The skirmishes between the belligerents are not worth noticing. The battle-royal was fought when the time came for Miss Clauson to be presented. Lady Clauson asserted that she was the proper person to present her step-daughter. Beatrice coldly declined her aid. Her ladyship insisted—her step-daughter was firm in her refusal. Sir Maingay declared himself under his wife's banner, and for once attempted to assert parental authority. Whereupon Miss Clauson cut the matter short, and declined being presented at all. It was a most dreadful

state of affairs! You can, at least, drive a horse to the water, even if you can't make him drink; but you dare not haul a refractory young woman into the presence of a gracious sovereign.

Lady Clauson, who was rigidly exact in following the prescribed usages of society, may not have been far wrong when she declared that "a baronet's daughter, who refused to be presented, was—well, a monstrosity!"

Sir Maingay began to wish his ancestors had not separated themselves from the Roman Catholic communion. He could have sent his daughter to a nunnery. But then, he sadly reflected, she wouldn't have gone at any price. If put there by force, the Protestant League would soon have her out, and perhaps take her round the country spouting. The only thing the worried baronet could think of, was to send for his rebel, and ask her advice as to the best means of disposing of her troublesome self.

When alone with her father Beatrice always behaved prettily. She was very fond of him, although the remembrance of the tears, the text, the distracted vows, when contrasted with his second marriage for nothing but good looks, made her look upon him with a little contempt. She did not know that man is so gregarious a creature that it is not

meet for him to live alone. She heard his remarks in silence, then gave him her opinion on the matter.

"I don't want to be a nuisance to you, papa. I am eighteen now—too old to go back to school. It's nonsense, of course, to say I should like to earn my own living, because when I come of age I shall have some money. May I go and live at Fairholme?"

Fairholme was Sir Maingay's seldom-used seat in one of the southern counties.

"But you can't live there alone," he said.

"Yes, I could. Mrs. Williams could take care of me. I shall be happy enough."

"My dear girl, why not be reasonable and make friends with Lady Clauson? Then we could all go abroad together."

Lady Clauson, who was by no means a fool, had by this time found out that she needed something more than mere good looks to go down, or go up, in the society her heart longed for. She had, therefore, made up her mind to become a travelled woman, and had arranged that Sir Maingay should take her to a variety of foreign countries. The proposed tour was to be an affair of years, and her ladyship had a dim idea of writing, or of getting some one else to write a book, describing the well-

worn pathways she meant to tread. She hoped to take the world by storm as a literary woman.

"I can't go abroad with you," said Beatrice. "I shall be miserable myself and make you miserable."

"But if you stay in England you must be presented and come out and all that sort of thing."

"If ever I do get married," said Beatrice drily, "I will be presented as Lady Clauson was, on my marriage."

Sir Maingay's cheek reddened. He was much hurt by the sarcasm. Poor old King Lear found a fitting simile for an ungrateful child, but the sharpness of a sarcastic child is more painful than a whole jawful of serpent's teeth. He did not reply; but the worthy baronet was at his wits' end. What could he do with this girl? He had very few relations—he cared for none of them. Old Mr. Talbert, of Hazlewood House, was a confirmed invalid; Horace and Herbert were men without homes or wives. Sir Maingay was willing enough that Beatrice should remain in England. He had suffered much during the last few months from the dissensions of his wife and daughter. But where to bestow Beatrice?

At last he remembered an aunt of his own who lived in quiet retirement in one of the suburbs of London. It was of course absurd for Beatrice to

think of living at Fairholme, in a half-closed house with a housekeeper and one or two servants. So it was arranged that her great-aunt should take her while Sir Maingay and Lady Clauson were on the Continent. So to Mrs. Erskine's she went, and, as that lady was very old, very deaf, and saw no company, it may be presumed that Miss Clauson had scarcely a merry time of it during her father's absence—an absence which from one reason or another lasted quite four years.

After a while Sir Maingay almost forgot he had a daughter. The Clausons settled down to continental life for an indefinite time. Lady Clauson knew she was improving herself, and moreover, that Sir Maingay was saving enough money to refurnish the town house from top to bottom whenever they did return to England. In the course of the four years spent abroad, Lady Clauson rectified her predecessor's sins of omission, and gave her devoted husband two fine boy-babies. In the revived delights of paternity—a paternity which is so especially dear to middle age—Sir Maingay thought little of the troublesome, obstinate girl he had left in England. His wife and his boys all but turned her out of his heart. So here was Beatrice in the extraordinary position of being a baronet's daughter with scarcely a friend in the world.

At last the Clausons returned to England. Whether her ladyship wrote her book or not is a matter of uncertainty; anyway it was never published. Beatrice made no objection to rejoining the family circle. Her father and his wife found her greatly changed. She was quieter, more reserved, more amenable to reason. It seemed to Sir Maingay that she had passed her time at Mrs. Erskine's in study. The learning she had acquired almost frightened the baronet; but he was glad to see she had grown into a beautiful woman, and so he felt quite proud of his neglected daughter, and hoped that things would for the future run smoothly.

His hopes were vain. This time there was no doubt as to with whom the fault lay. A beauty, like Lady Clauson, could not endure the constant presence of a younger, fresher, and even more beautiful beauty. She was also jealous at the way in which her own children took to Beatrice. Besides she had never forgiven the girl. Relations soon grew strained, and towards the end of the year Beatrice wrote to her uncles, and asked if they would give her a home.

She was now nearly twenty-three. Having when she came of age succeeded to her late mother's third of old Talbert's possessions, she was independent both by age and by income. She was

willing to live at Hazlewood House, if her uncles would take her. If not, she resolved to start an establishment of her own. She was still in her former anomalous position—a baronet's daughter, who had never made a proper entrance into society. As Lady Clauson said, she must have been a wrong-minded young woman as this omission seemed to trouble her very little.

The Talberts, who liked the little they had seen of their niece, went into solemn conclave on the request. They decided, in the event of Sir Maingay giving his consent—on that point they were most exacting—she might come to them. Sir Maingay raised no objections, so Beatrice Clauson came to Hazlewood House, where since her arrival, about a week ago, she had lived in a state of amused wonder as the amiable peculiarities of the "Tabbies" gradually revealed themselves to her.

She had, of course, intended to make herself useful to her uncles. It may have been the want of some occupation, other than study, which made her turn her eyes to Hazlewood House and the two bachelors. She was no longer a schoolgirl, so at once broadly hinted that she was willing to regulate their household matters. The silent horror with which the proposal was received told her, at once, that her place was to be a sinecure. She saw that

her uncles would on no account dream of intrusting their researches into domestic economy to any hands save their own, and the surpassing capability of those hands was deeply impressed upon her when, the day after her arrival, she found Uncle Horace bending over the maid who did the plain sewing, and, in the patientest and gravest way, teaching her the most approved fashion of handling a needle and thread.

After having lived at Hazlewood House for a week Miss Clauson must have been ready to welcome any event of interest. It is no wonder that, when Horace Talbert, at Mr. Mordle's suggestion, walked into the drawing-room and told his niece what had happened, her curiosity and excitement rose to a high pitch.

"Is it a pretty child?" she asked.

"Wonderfully so. Mordle and Herbert are petting it like a couple of women."

Beatrice did not run at once to see for herself. "What do you mean to do about it, Uncle Horace?" she asked.

"I don't know. I suppose we must keep it till to-morrow and see if the mystery is explained. You had better come out and give us your advice."

Beatrice walked into the hall. The child had made great progress during Horace's absence. The

curate was tickling him and making him laugh. Herbert was stroking his bright hair in quite a paternal way. Even the respectable Whittaker was smiling pleasantly.

"What a dear little man!" exclaimed Beatrice, as she walked to the table and looked at the sturdy urchin.

She was the first woman the child had seen since he left his friends at the refreshment-room. Maid-servants, with the curiosity of their sex and kind, had peeped surreptitiously over the balustrade, but had not attracted notice. At such a tender age as his woman is a child's natural protector. He at once quitted his stalwart friends and ran across the table to the fair girl, who smiled and opened her arms. The little man darted into them, and with a chirrup of delight laid his head on the girl's shoulder and seemed perfectly happy and at rest. He was so pretty that no woman could have refrained from caressing him. Miss Clauson kissed him again and again, then, like every one who came near him, fell to stroking his golden locks and twining them round her fingers. The child's eyes began to close under her soft and soothing touches.

"He must go to bed," said Beatrice, decisively.

"Certainly," said Uncle Horace. "Where had he better sleep?"

"Jane has a most comfortable bed," said Herbert.

Jane was the parlour-maid, but Herbert in his housewifely capacity knew the quality of every bed in the house; even the amount of bedding on each. Mr. Mordle turned away. He was afraid of disgracing himself by a burst of ill-timed mirth.

"No, no," exclaimed Beatrice; "he shall sleep with me. Look at him, Uncle Horace: isn't he a perfect cherub?"

"He's a pretty little boy; but we don't know where he comes from, my dear. I hardly think you ought to take a strange infant to sleep with you."

"Oh, nonsense, Uncle Horace! See what a clean, beautiful boy it is. Whittaker, send a large can of hot water to my room. Come, my pet; I will see how I can act the part of a nurse-maid."

Singing and crooning and carrying the child in the most approved fashion, Miss Clauson proceeded to bear her prize away.

"You had better look at his linen, Beatrice," said Horace. "It may be marked with his name."

After this the three men went back to the

dining-room and talked the curious occurrence over and over.

In about half an hour's time Beatrice reappeared with the intelligence that the boy's clothing bore no mark of any kind. Indeed, it all seemed brand new. She was apparently much delighted with her new toy. She kept running up and down-stairs, to ascertain that her *protégé* was sleeping the sleep of innocent babyhood. At last she went away altogether.

"Beatrice is more demonstrative than I believed her to be," said Horace, regretfully. Herbert echoed the regret, but Mr. Mordle said nothing. He thought the instinctive kindness she showed towards this mysteriously-sent child added another charm to the many he had already discovered in Miss Clauson.

The three men sat altogether until it was too late to hope that matters would be cleared up that night. No mother, no telegram came. The curate bade his friends good night and walked back to his lodgings in the village, thinking what a charming picture Miss Clauson with the child in her arms made. Poor Mr. Mordle! He had only known Beatrice a week, and was already beginning to dream a foolish dream.

The brothers continued sitting one on either

side of the fire. They were not early-to-bed people. Now that they were alone they said little more about the arrival. For three hours they had been discussing every possible theory which might account for the child's appearance among them, so the subject was threadbare, and they sat in silence trying to invent fresh causes. Suddenly a most curious and startling suspicion entered Horace Talbert's mind—a suspicion which now and again made him glance at his brother. Could Herbert by any chance know all about the matter? He had certainly seemed greatly taken with the little boy. Horace remembered how much at home the child had made himself with Herbert. How, when he, Horace, came out of the drawing-room with Beatrice, he had found Herbert stroking and patting the little head. Could there be romantic passages in Herbert's life about which he knew nothing? He pooh-poohed the thought; but it came again and again.

Just after one o'clock, and when the brothers were thinking of retiring, to their great surprise Beatrice reappeared. She was in dainty dressing-gown and slippers. After waiting until Mr. Mordle must certainly have gone she had come down—of course to hear if any news had arrived. Uncle Horace, with his eyes fixed on Herbert, expressed

his conviction that no news was meant to arrive. Beatrice looked musingly into the fire. Her head was bent forward, her hands clasped round one of her knees. She made a pretty, almost classical-looking picture, no doubt duly approved of by those men of taste, her uncles.

"Then what will you do?" she asked, at last.

"We will wait until to-morrow, or the day after; then put the matter into the hands of the police," said Horace decisively.

Herbert said nothing, so his brother's suspicions increased. Beatrice rose, as if to say good night. She stood for awhile on the rug, apparently intently interested in a series of tiny circles which she was describing with the point of one slipper. Presently she looked up with a flushed cheek and spoke in a quick hurried way.

"If nobody comes for the boy would you mind my keeping him?"

"My dear!" cried Uncle Horace, aghast. "Here?"

She clasped her hands. "Oh, Uncle Horace!" she said, "I have had such a dreary miserable life ever since I was seventeen. I have nothing to do —nothing to live or care for. I could be so happy with that dear child to look after. Come up and see him sleeping. He is the sweetest baby!"

"Such nonsense, Beatrice!" Uncle Horace

settled himself into his chair and showed by the action that a legion of sleeping babies would not induce him to go and look at their slumbering forms.

"Then, you come, Uncle Herbert. He is a prettier sight than any of your old masters."

Herbert gave his quiet smile. He was of less stern stuff than Horace—that is, if either of the Talberts could be called stern. He suffered Beatrice to lead him to her room; duly admired the little stranger, then, with his niece, returned to Horace. After this manifestation of weakness Horace's unworthy suspicion was all but certainty.

"You will let me keep him?" pleaded Beatrice. "I am sure you will."

Horace made no reply to her unreasonable request. In their usual dignified manner the two gentlemen made their preparations for shutting up. Beatrice went back to her room.

"She grows very, very impulsive," sighed Horace. This time Herbert said nothing. As he got into bed Horace Talbert told himself that Herbert knew all about the boy; he also told himself that no power on earth should induce him to tax Herbert with this knowledge. A man's private affairs were his own property: he himself had laid down this dogma and must now stick to it; the more so be-

cause on a former occasion he had broken with Herbert for six years because the latter had infringed on this rule.

CHAPTER V.

MR. MORDLE MAKES A RASH PROMISE.

THE next morning the Talberts did an unusual thing; they broke one of their rules by opening their letters before breakfast. They had a time and a place for everything, and their time for reading their correspondence was with their second cups of tea. But so anxious were they to see if their letters contained anything explanatory of last night's occurrence, that the seals were broken at once. They found a couple of invitations to dinner, receipts for payments made two posts ago, the usual amount of circulars, tradesmen's lists, and appeals for charity; but not a word about the child. Then the kettle was brought, and Herbert set about making the tea. Under some unwritten code of division of labour or honour, the younger brother always presided at the breakfast table.

Presently Miss Clauson made her appearance with the child on her arm. She had washed him

and dressed him, combed his hair into a wavy mass of burnished gold, and so brought him to the breakfast table fresh and sweet as a rose in June. She placed him on a chair beside her, by the aid of sundry cushions raising him up to a proper level. Having adjusted him to her satisfaction, she ordered bread and milk to be prepared.

The Talberts made no objection to Beatrice's proceedings, although they fancied the child would have been sent to breakfast with the servants. Being anxious to see him by daylight, they screwed their eyeglasses in place, and once more minutely inspected their sturdy little visitor. Even Uncle Horace nodded approval of his bonny looks and fearless bearing, whilst Herbert joined Beatrice in petting him.

The boy seemed happy enough in his new quarters. It is indeed a sad thing to remark how soon a child forgets its mother. He cries because he misses warmth, food, or comfort—not on account of the absence of the being who has lavished oceans of love upon him.

This particular baby, having been so cruelly deserted, may perhaps be excused for making the best of his changed circumstances, and laughing merrily when called upon so to do; but other babies

cannot be absolved from the sin of callous indifference and non-reciprocation of love.

Beatrice having ascertained that no news had arrived, said nothing that bore upon her startling suggestion of last night. Perhaps she saw that the bright saucy child interested and amused her uncles; so, with the diplomatic gifts natural to her sex, judged it better to let the matter rest for a while. As soon as breakfast was over, she led the child away, and spent the remainder of the day playing with and petting him to her heart's content. It really seemed as if Miss Clauson had found a new interest in life.

And, to tell the truth, she was a young woman who appeared to want something to arouse her. She was now, at the age of twenty-two, very different from the girl who so hastily threw down the glove to her step-mother. Her quietness and undemonstrative manner, of which the Talberts so much approved, seemed scarcely natural to a girl with beauty, rank, and riches. For, indeed, she was beautiful. If her face showed no colour, its healthy pallor was more attractive to a right-minded man than all the rosy cheeks that ever existed. Her brown hair grew in great masses, and low down on her well-shaped forehead. Her eyes were grey —a strange wonderful grey—so deep in shade that

most people would have called her dark-eyed. Her features were perfectly straight. Her face was oval. Her lips were just full enough to make her apathetic demeanour seem inconsistent with the dogmas of physiognomy.

Beatrice Clauson was, in fact, a feminine, toned-down edition of the Talberts. The characteristics which were with them exaggerated, with her were reproduced in exactly the right proportions. Their faces were elongated ovals—her face was a proper oval. Their noses were straight, but too long—her nose was straight, and just long enough. They were, if anything, too tall—she was only tall enough to be called a fine girl. Miss Clauson's personal appearance was a living proof of how fitting had been the alliance between Sir Maingay Clauson and old Talbert's daughter. The first Lady Clauson had been the counterpart of her brothers. Sir Maingay was short, round-faced, and rather round-bodied. With Beatrice, the blemishes which had detracted from her parents' good looks reappeared as beauties.

Moreover, she had that air of distinction upon the possession of which the Talberts not unjustly prided themselves. They were glad to think it came to her from their side of the family—her father, the baronet, being, like most baronets and other titled personages, a very ordinary-looking man. Ten to

one, if you go to a charity ball or other mixed assembly, upon asking the names of the most distinguished-looking men you will find them nobodies. I never inquire now—it is too painful to be told that the noble-presenced man who smiles so condescendingly is Mr. Smith, whilst that other insignificant-looking being is Lord This or the Duke of That. It upsets one's cherished ideal as to what the aristocracy should be.

Beatrice Clauson, then, was very fair to see, and had what silly people call a thoroughbred look. Fond as those amiable men, her uncles, were of the girl, she was doubly dear to them because that look was indubitably owing to the Talbert strain of blood in her veins.

This morning she threw books, music, painting, everything aside, and played with her new toy. It was Saturday. The "Tabbies," who invariably went shopping together, were bound to Blacktown to buy groceries. Before starting, Herbert found his way to Beatrice, and asked her if she had any commissions to be executed in the city. He discovered her with flushed face and rumpled hair romping with the child. He watched them with amusement; then, going up-stairs, found after a little search, in one of the attics, some antiquated, battered toys, which five-and-thirty years ago had been dear to

Horace and himself. He carried them down-stairs, and Beatrice thanked him for the kindly thought and act.

When, in a few hours' time, the brothers drove back with a waggonette full of tea, coffee, sugar, yellow soap, house flannel, Bath stone, emery paper, or whatever else was needful to make the wheels of household management run smoothly, they found Beatrice still engrossed by her charge. They did not say much to her. Saturday was too busy a day to think of anything save the affairs of the house, and as many precious minutes had been wasted in making inquiries at Blacktown station, the brothers were hardly pressed for time—so hardly pressed that when, about four o'clock, the curate called, they sent their apologies by Whittaker, and left their visitor to be entertained by Miss Clauson.

The Rev. Sylvanus Mordle, when he thanked Heaven for the many blessings it had bestowed upon him, always excepted the name he bore from the list. It was, he told himself, a particularly terrible name—doubly so when its owner was a clergyman. He felt it to be provocative of laughter, if not of contempt. Even as a Howard, a Talbot, a Montmorency, or a Plantagenet is called upon to live up to the great name he bears, Mr. Mordle found it incumbent on himself to endeavour to live

away from his singular designation. To counteract the sinister effects of such a name he felt compelled to effect an air of cheerfulness even under the most trying circumstances which fully justify a man's looking lugubrious. He considered his name a great drawback to him in his professional career. The gift which every young clergyman fancies he possesses, of preaching impassioned sermons, was sadly shorn by his name. In this perverted age, when puns are not considered signs of social depravity, Mr. Mordle felt sure that a tear in his eye—even the delivery of a pathetic sermon—would be fatal. The least lachrymose tendency in manner or words would present too great a temptation to be resisted by weak human nature: in spite of the best intentions the word "mordling" must suggest itself.

A surname one cannot choose any more than one can choose a dark or a fair skin; but whilst the curate was willing to allow that the name of Mordle was an unavoidable congenital misfortune, its conjunction with Sylvanus he looked upon as a foul crime, and reviled the godfathers and godmothers who had tacked such a soft-sounding appellation on to Mordle.

On the principle of living it down, he was always brisk and cheery in his manner. It was never too hot, never too cold, never too sunny, never

too windy for the Sylvanus Mordle. He preached almost merry sermons, conveyed in short incisive sentences, rattled out in a quick, decisive, quite-beyond-doubt way. His phrases followed one another like the detonations of a cracker. They seemed designed to slap the listener on the breast, and hammer and hammer away at that sin-hardened receptacle as if meaning by a series of repeated blows to enforce conviction and obedience. They were crisp, strong, muscular exhortations, eminently suited to the spiritual needs of the poorer parishioners. Only when he preached a funeral sermon could Mr. Mordle's style be cavilled at. On such an occasion he was bound to be doubly careful not to get his manner mixed up with his name, so sometimes his discourse did not quite satisfy the bereft relations and grieving friends.

But a funeral sermon was only due to a deceased member of one of the families of position: moreover, Oakbury is a healthy spot, and when an important death did occur the rector was usually in his place to do his duty. So the Rev. Sylvanus managed very well.

For the rest, he was a man of about thirty, pleasant-looking and popular, not disdainful of the good things of this world, yet not hankering after them—doing the whole work of a curate and three-

fourths of that of a rector for one hundred and twenty pounds a year. It was lucky he had a good constitution and a small fortune of his own!

This afternoon Mr. Mordle felt the Talberts' excuses no slight to himself. He begged the brothers might not be disturbed. He was quite content that Miss Clauson should entertain him *tête-à-tête* as long as possible. He inquired if any news had arrived about the missing mother; then, turning his attention to the child, went through a variety of those little actions which grown-up people, rightly or wrongly, suppose ingratiate children. Noticing how the pretty boy clung to Beatrice, he complimented her on her rapid conquest of his affections —a compliment in which Miss Clauson might have found a deeper meaning lurking had she cared to look for it. He would have called much earlier to learn what had transpired, but had been compelled to attend a funeral several miles off. He alluded to the melancholy reason for his delay with as much cheerfulness as many people mention a wedding.

"And where are your uncles?" he asked.

"In the housekeeper's room," answered Beatrice demurely.

"Busy, of course—Saturday. Bad day to call. What are they about now?"

As he jerked out his short sentences, Beatrice glanced at him and saw his eyes twinkling. She could not help smiling.

"Well—what is it?" asked Mr. Mordle.

The girl gave a little gurgle of laughter. The curate once more repeated his question.

"Oh, Mr. Mordle," said Beatrice, "they are doing the clothes!"

"Quite right; some one must do them. Now I wonder," he continued, in a more reflective way than usual, "I wonder if they look them out for the wash on Mondays."

"Oh, no; not so bad as that. But did you ever know anything so funny!"

"Took you by surprise, of course?" said the curate briskly.

"Yes. I had heard something about it, but the reality overwhelmed me. Uncle Horace doing woolwork was my first experience. The next morning I found Uncle Herbert doling out stores to the cook. And to see them manage the house better than any woman!"

"Delightful. I could tell you some very amusing things, Miss Clauson."

"Please don't. They are so kind and amiable I can't bear to laugh at them."

"They are kind. I love them dearly. What

my poor people would do without them I can't think. If they'll leave you enough to do, you're certain to be happy here."

Beatrice smiled. She remembered the horror they had displayed at the bare thought of her having any part in the domestic arrangements of Hazlewood House. It seemed to Mr. Mordle that he had never seen Miss Clauson look so bright and lively as she looked to-day. She looked most lovingly at the child, who, tired of his play, lay peacefully on her lap.

"But I have not enough to do," she said, her hand the while caressing the boy's golden head. "Mr. Mordle, I wish you would help me in something."

"Anything—everything—command me," said the curate in his quickest, most decisive way.

"I have taken such a fancy to this dear little man, that, supposing his people do not reveal themselves, I want to persuade my uncles to let me keep him. I could be so happy with him here." She kissed and fondled the boy.

Now that he saw whither his rash promise was to lead him, Mr. Mordle paused and hesitated. "I am sure Uncle Herbert wouldn't mind," added Beatrice.

"Mr. Talbert would never consent," said Mr. Mordle.

"What harm would it do?" asked Beatrice.

The Rev. Sylvanus was silent. He did not like to tell the girl that the retention at Hazlewood House of this mysteriously-sent child might create scandal.

"You will help me, will you not?" pleaded Beatrice. The look in her eyes turned Sylvanus's heart into wax.

So, with the weakness of male humanity when thus assailed, he promised to do what he could to insure her wish being carried out. Beatrice gave him a look of gratitude, the very remembrance of which he felt would repay him for a much greater service than the one she entreated of him. By-and-by he took his leave of her in that happy frame of mind peculiar to the man who has laid a lovely woman under an obligation.

Horace and Herbert he did not see. They were detained for an indefinite period. The linen paid in by the laundress did not balance with the counterfoil in the washing-book, so they had to go through it again—an annoying, but a necessary task.

CHAPTER VI.

BEATRICE TRIUMPHANT.

MISS CLAUSON carried her point. Her success was due to a curious combination of events, as well as to her own persistence and eloquent pleading. She managed to get Uncle Herbert alone—a difficult matter, as the "Tabbies" were almost always together—and, after sundry arguments and entreaties, if unable to win his consent to her proposed arrangement, exacted a promise from him that he would not object if Horace approved of her keeping the boy. To be sure he had not the faintest idea that Horace would consent.

Mr. Mordle, the adviser of the family, and Herbert Talbert thus brought on her side or rendered neutral, Horace remained the arbiter of the boy's fate, and Miss Clauson directed all her energies towards making him yield.

Like a clever girl, she took care that the young intruder should be no nuisance to any one, not even to the servants. When her uncles saw him they saw him at his best. At the first signs of bad behaviour

Beatrice whipped him away. As he had not yet run a muck through their bric-a-brac, not demolished a ruby-backed plate, or detruncated a Chelsea figure, they had no fault to find with his general behaviour. Indeed they liked to see the little fellow about the place, and the confiding way in which sometimes he climbed upon Horace's knee was quite touching. He was not a bit afraid of these tall grave men. Children see further in some ways than grown-up people, and no doubt the little boy felt instinctively that many excellent feminine traits were hidden under the broad bosoms of the stalwart "Tabbies."

They tacitly left his fate in abeyance for more than a week; then Beatrice, who perhaps trembled lest some childish act of mischief might defeat her ends, and who thought that the boy had well done his part in the affair by making himself so easily tolerated, attacked her uncles once more. True to his promise, Herbert said his brother must decide the matter.

"Do you want the child to stay?" asked Horace, turning to the speaker.

"I told Beatrice you should decide."

This answer assured Horace that Herbert knew everything that was to be known.

"My dear Beatrice," he said, "the thing is quite impracticable."

Her mouth quivered. It was clear she had set her heart on keeping her new pet.

"Why is it impracticable? What difference can a child make in a house like this? He will be my sole care."

Uncle Horace looked uneasy. "My dear, you forget it may give rise to scandal."

"Scandal! what scandal?"

Horace grew red. One can't talk plainly to young innocent girls without feeling how bad mankind in general is.

"Hum—ha," he said. "You must remember, Beatrice, we are two single men; not elderly men. As soon as it is known that we have kept the child sent here so strangely, we give a handle to suspicion and scandal. Do you agree with me, Herbert?"

"I am afraid it will be so, Beatrice," said Herbert, regretfully.

Miss Clauson drew herself up proudly. It was an action the Talberts always liked to see in the girl, and which had a great effect on them.

"Surely," she said, "you of all people are above suspicion and scandal?"

They were pleased to think this was the truth. They felt that Beatrice was right. What after all had scandal to do with them? The domestic virtues

and clockwork regulation of Hazlewood House might defy the breath of the most censorious world. As this great truth came home to him Horace seemed to purr with pleasure.

But he had no intention of yielding. He was for one thing much annoyed with Herbert. Herbert evidently wanted the boy to stay. If so he should say so outright, not let Beatrice fight his battles. So the most Beatrice could get him to promise was that the boy might remain for a few days longer.

In those few days something happened. First of all a piece of gossip went round the neighbourhood and eventually reached the ears of those who were gossiped about—the Talberts. They heard that they were harbouring Lord Hadwynn's eldest son, whose mysterious disappearance had been reported in the papers. Lord Hadwynn was an utter reprobate, and it was well known that his injured wife had smuggled the child out of his way. Lady Hadwynn was an acquaintance of the Talberts; so that even Horace was for a moment staggered when he heard the theory propounded by his neighbours. Then some kind creature wrote to the bereft husband, and his lordship rushed down to Oakbury fierce as a consuming flame—a flame which resolved itself into smoke when he was shown the boy, and found him nothing like his missing son. After

this, gossip should have died a natural death, but it did not. People who are determined to swallow a monstrous tale will lick it into the shape they can deal with best. In spite of the Talberts' strenuous denials and plain statement as to how the child was thrown upon their hands, everybody would have it that if not Lord Hadwynn's son, he was some one else's—meaning some one, a nobleman's probably, whose wife had, for private reasons of her own, intrusted him to the Talberts.

Even the reputation of being a harbour of refuge for a duchess or countess in her distress is a flattering thing; and the Talberts, especially Horace, felt pleased while laughing at the absurd idea. Perhaps it was for this reason that Horace at last yielded to his niece's solicitations, and astonished her one day by saying—

"Beatrice, if you really mean to keep that child for a while, we will engage a nurse for it."

She said nothing, but gave Uncle Horace a most grateful kiss. She must have grown wondrously fond of the baby, as her eyes were full of glad tears.

That afternoon she drove into Blacktown, and rigged the child out from head to foot in new and dainty raiment; nothing was too good for him. Horace and Herbert, who knew the price of lace,

lawns, and cambrics to a penny a yard, wondered how far her whim was going to carry her. Perhaps they felt rather aggrieved that their aid had not been asked. They dearly loved a little shopping, and could have chosen a trousseau or a layette with any woman under the sun.

But the affair of the nursemaid was peculiarly their own. If the Talberts had one gift of housewifery above another, it was their skill in engaging suitable servants. When they called on a lady for a maid's character, the questions they put were of the most searching and cogent nature. They were not satisfied with the broad assertion that she was sober, honest, and cleanly—they cross-examined until they found out all the weak and strong points in her composition, then engaged her or not as they thought best. Many a confiding young woman, who fancied in going into the service of two rich bachelor gentlemen, she was about to have a grand, lazy, slatternly time of it, found herself grossly deceived. Some even declared they'd rather have twenty mistresses than two such masters. Nevertheless it was a good place, and any girl who had stayed at Hazlewood House a twelvemonth might have had the pick of vacancies in the neighbourhood. To have given satisfaction to the Talberts for so long was a three-volume character.

At last, after a number of interviews with candidates, they found a nurse-girl who came up to the standard of their requirements. One who had no followers, and who made no objection to wearing a cap—moreover, the cap of the pattern they had themselves designed. A member of the Church of England, of course, who promised to communicate every two months, and to be contented with Dorset butter during the winter.

So the mysterious child was as good as adopted at Hazlewood House.

A serious question arose as to whether the infant had ever been christened. Miss Clauson felt sure it had been. The child came to them too well-dressed to suppose such an important rite had been omitted. The Rev. Sylvanus, who was known to be disgracefully lax about such matters, did not urge that assurance should be made doubly sure, so no baptismal ceremony took place. After some consultation it was decided that the boy should be known as Henry.

"Henry," said Uncle Horace, "is a safe name; thoroughly adaptable to any station in life."

So Henry it was. The surname they left in abeyance, trusting that time or chance might some day reveal it.

Every article of clothing worn by the child on

its arrival was folded up, and together with the direction-card placed in the big safe. They might hereafter be needed for the purposes of identification.

So Beatrice Clauson was confirmed in the possession of her toy—her toy! In a month's time little Harry was every one's toy. The Talberts themselves were ashamed to say how glad they were that Beatrice's whim had been carried out, but it was currently reported that shortly afterwards, when the boy was suffering from some transient childish ailment, the two tall brothers were seen intently poring over that interesting work, Dr. Bull's *Hints to Mothers!* But this, I believe, was scandal.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GREAT JUNE AUDIT.

THE wisest sometimes make mistakes. The most careful housekeeper has been known to spoil a pudding by putting salt instead of sugar on it. Let it then be no detraction from the Talberts' general administrative ability, that the nurse girl turned out badly. They had been so successful with cooks, parlour-maids, house-maids, and kitchen-maids, that their failure in this one instance must not be considered.

The girl's misdeeds need not be detailed, suffice it to say, the culmination of them was this—Horace and Herbert, driving up the lane one evening, saw a young man and woman embracing vigorously and generally having a happy time of it. They could not recognise the girl, but felt sure she was one of their household, so the discreet Whittaker was ordered to wait at the side-door and send the first arrival to his masters.

Of course, she repelled the accusation. She had indeed stepped out for a minute to post a letter to

her aged mother, but as for speaking to, much less kissing a man—well she never did! Alas for feminine veracity! On the back of her print dress was the impression of four fingers and a thumb, printed there in good black mould, for it was an under-gardener who had succumbed to her charms. It was Herbert, who, whilst Horace expostulated, was seated at the table and so saw her back, who drew attention to this damning evidence. This gave rise to impertinence and a month's warning, given in the most dignified and calm way by her masters.

They decided to engage an older and staider body, and being perhaps rather crestfallen, allowed Miss Clauson to have a voice in the matter. One morning a quiet-looking, pale-faced woman waited upon them. She heard that a nurse was wanted and offered her services. Character she had none to give, having been out of service for some years; but plenty of people would speak for her respectability. The Talberts were much taken with her general demeanour; but hummed and hawed when they found she did not come red-hot from a place. Horace examined her attentively through his eye-glass.

"Haven't I seen you before?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I lived many years ago with Mr.

Merton of Cavendish Square. You were often at the house."

She said her name was Miller, and that she was a widow. She spoke well and in that respectful, but not servile, way which the Talberts liked. If they could bring themselves to get over the absence of credentials, and deny themselves the pleasure of calling on and cross-examining a former mistress, they thought this woman might do.

Beatrice had no doubt about it; and upon such inquiries as could be made being answered satisfactorily, Mrs. Miller was installed in the place of the frail failure whose escapade with the gardener had lowered the whole moral tone of the establishment. A giddy girl in a bachelor's establishment means destruction.

But Mrs. Miller was a very different matter. Miss Clauson found her perfection—nimble-handed, kind, and experienced—moreover, quite qualified to fulfil the duties of lady's-maid when occasion required. Whittaker approved of her. She was a coadjutor after his own respectable heart. The first one to be considered, the boy, took to her as readily as he had taken to Beatrice. Horace and Herbert, in spite of the sharp look-out they kept for a while, could find no flaw in her conduct, and when at the end of two months they ascertained that she had

used less soap—four cakes less than her predecessor had during her short stay, they began to think they had acquired a treasure.

"For the child looks as clean as ever," said Herbert to Horace. "I always felt sure that girl left the soap in the hot water and forgot all about it."

The last winter months and the spring months passed very quietly at Hazlewood House. The Talberts and their niece dined occasionally with the best families in the neighbourhood, and in return the Talberts asked the best families to dine with them. The seven days' wonder about the boy had almost died away. Every one of course felt sure he was somebody, but no one knew what body. If there was any scandal the serene brothers heard it not. It is true that old Lady Bowker, a very important personage, paid them a visit on purpose to find out all about everything. She had known the Talberts as boys, so felt entitled to ask them point-blank for an explanation. People who have known you as a boy are as a rule great nuisances.

She told them she wanted to speak to them on private business, so Beatrice left the room. Then she turned from one to the other of the grave, long-faced men—

"Now, Horace, now, Herbert, what is the mean-

ing of this affair? Who is the boy you are making such a fuss about?"

"I don't think we ever make fusses," said Herbert in a deprecating way.

"Certainly not," said Horace, with decision.

"Well, mysteries then—we all want to know who this child really is—the child who came in the dead of night wrapped up in an antimacassar or something—came by Pickford's van, I am told."

"I wish you could tell us, Lady Bowker. We know no more than you do."

"That's all nonsense, Horace. I hear you have engaged a nurse, and that the child is to stay with you. I think you are most inconsiderate."

"We are never inconsiderate," said Horace.

"Certainly not," said his brother.

"Yes, you are. You are inconsiderate in not letting at least one safe discreet person into the secret. Some one like myself who could vouch for you."

"We don't want to be vouched for."

"Yes, you do—I don't see you are any better than other people."

Lady Bowker was growing cross at their mild obstinacy.

"You are most inconsiderate towards Miss

Clauson. Here, a week after she comes to live with you, this infant makes its appearance. Of course people say you were only waiting until there was a lady at Hazlewood House to look after him."

"They say that, do they?" asked Horace, reflectively.

"What else can they say? I don't say so; but then I have known you so long. I say that you have some excellent reason for keeping this child; but you ought to tell one person at least who he really is."

"But we don't know."

"Yes, you do. Now tell me, like good men."

They repeated their simple statement, adding that the child was kept by Beatrice's express wish; also because they hoped the mystery would one day be solved; and because they themselves felt a friendly disposition towards the little waif.

"I don't believe a word of it," said Lady Bowker rudely, and rising to go. The brothers smiled calmly.

"You will only have yourselves to blame for the scandal," continued their visitor. Still they smiled.

"Dear Lady Bowker," said Horace, softly, "will you still ask us to dinner occasionally?"

"Of course I shall."

"And still honour Hazlewood House with your presence?"

"Yes—when you ask me."

"Then," said Horace, "we feel we can hold our own against the world."

Lady Bowker drove away in a thorough bad temper; but feeling more certain than ever that the child was somebody. Indeed, she managed to convey to most people the impression that she was in the secret.

"Lady Bowker is a trifle vulgar sometimes," said Horace sadly.

"She is," assented Herbert.

It was a painful thing for them to be compelled to make such an accusation against a well-known member of the aristocracy; but they were conscientious men, and spoke the truth even when it lacerated their feelings.

Then in a quiet methodical manner they went to work and dusted all the Oriental china in a large cabinet on the first landing. They were fond of Oriental china, which they considered the aristocrat of ceramics.

It is of course a proud position for a man to hold when he feels he can defy the scandal of a place like Oakbury, but nevertheless Horace Talbert

was much annoyed, and as week after week went by this annoyance increased. He thought that Herbert should have spoken to him. He had waived his objections to keeping the child at Hazlewood House, and now that the matter was settled, Herbert ought to have told him everything. Faithful to his creed of non-interference, he said or showed nothing of the state of his mind until the great June audit came round.

The great June audit was this. We have seen how exactly just the brothers were towards one another, in the matter of pounds, shillings, and pence: so it will be easily understood that the accounts were kept with the most clerkly correctness. Horace was the paymaster, and every item of expenditure was duly entered in an account-book—his long, elegant handwriting looking quite out of place when used for such base purposes. If the accounts were not kept by the Italian system of double entry, they were couched in a form which was perfectly intelligible. After all, there must have been a strong strain of trading blood in the Talberts. If one of them kept a horse more than the other it was charged to his account. If one was ill, and a doctor's bill came in consequence, he was debited with the amount. Tradesmen's accounts were dissected and charged off to the proper

parties, and, as soon as possible after the 30th of June, Horace prepared an elaborate statement of affairs, which the two men checked through, signed, and settled up whatever amount was due from one to the other. Nothing could have been fairer.

But this year, when the accounts were submitted to his inspection, Herbert Talbert opened his eyes in astonishment at one item with which he was charged. "I don't understand this," he said, laying his finger on one amount which stood against him. Horace, without looking, knew what it was. He had weighed the matter carefully before he made that particular entry.

"I think I have charged it as low as in justice I could," he said.

"But why is it charged at all?" asked Herbert, raising his eyebrows.

Now the entry was: Wages of nurse, six months, £9 10*s.* 0*d.*; estimated keep of nurse and child for six months, say £27 16*s.* 0*d.*; total, £37 6*s.* 0*d.*

"I thought," said Horace slowly—"in fact your manner at various times gave me to understand—that it was right and just I should make this entry."

Herbert's face grew red. He was as nearly in

a rage as he had ever been in his life. Yet he answered not in words. He took a quill pen, and drew a thick ink line through the entry, thereby giving Horace a morning's work in re-copying his elaborate statement, and altering the totals.

Nothing more was said. Herbert's manner of denial was more emphatic than words. His brother knew that he would never have disputed a sixpence which he was justly liable to pay. Horace did not apologise for his suspicion; he felt that having allowed Herbert to blot and mutilate his fair balance-sheet without a word of protest was more than enough compensation, and no doubt Herbert thought the same, for peace was restored, and the matter never again mentioned.

The consequence was that, after the June audit, even Horace was unable to frame any theory to account for the way in which the boy had appeared among them. He felt, moreover, he had been rather taken in—that his consent to the child's remaining had been won under false pretences, or, rather, because he had deceived himself. However, it was now too late to alter the course of events, and, to tell the truth, Horace Talbert in his own grave, solemn way petted the child almost as much as Beatrice did.

About this time the Rev. Sylvanus Mordle made

a great resolve. Months ago he had come to the conclusion that Miss Clauson's grey eyes and classical face had wrought havoc with his heart. The M. B. waistcoat, which covered it—Sylvanus was orthodox at least in his attire—might have been of wet tissue paper for the little protection it had afforded him. He had not until now met the woman he wished to make his wife, although his single state was in no wise due to any views as to the peculiar fitness of celibacy for the priesthood. Such iniquitous doctrines he scouted, as they deserve to be scouted, by all who owe anything to the fierce, brave, vulgar, coarse, and truly human reformer, who boldly asserted that comforts of married life were not superfluous luxuries. After Miss Clauson had been at Hazlewood House for a month, the curate knew that a crisis in his fate was approaching. He slapped himself heartily on his broad chest, and told the Rev. Sylvanus Mordle that here at last was the one maid for him.

This, so far as it went, was eminently satisfactory. Unluckily, or luckily, there are two parties to every bargain, two sides to every hedge, and the curate felt that the hedge between himself and Miss Clauson was a high one.

Nevertheless, like a bold man, he went to work to climb it or break through it. It was, indeed,

high time he took some action in the matter. Under the present circumstances, he found his enforced habit of appearing cheerful to all, even himself, becoming a great strain upon his resources. There were times when he felt tempted to seek some secluded corner of his parish, and sigh dolefully beneath its famous oaks. Times when, in his own words, he felt inclined to go out and bay the moon, or generally do what is consoling to unsettled lovers.

All this and more, for the sake of Beatrice Clauson's grey eyes, brown hair, and straight profile! The Rev. Sylvanus was, indeed, in a bad way, and knew he should not be his own man again until his love was crowned, or kicked into the gutter.

So one Sunday evening he preached a crisp, exhilarating, detonating sermon, in which he showed his parishioners how right it was that man should choose a helpmeet. He preached it really to encourage himself, but its immediate effect upon his flock was that on the next Sunday the banns of marriage between no less than three couples were called; so it must have been a most convincing discourse.

On the Monday, he mounted his tricycle, and, after going his parochial round, drove or pro-

pelled himself on tremulous wheels to Hazlewood House.

Sylvanus, on his tricycle, was a lovely sight, but one which, upon its first introduction, filled Oakbury with consternation. To see a clergyman, in a long black coat and broad-brimmed hat, working vigorously with muscular legs, and sending himself along at the rate of ten miles an hour, was an upheaval of all traditions. Only his popularity saved him. Indeed, old Mrs. Pierrepont, a parishioner in a chronic state of aggrievedness, wrote to the bishop on the subject. She called it a "bicycle-machine," not exaggerating, but diminishing, so far as wheels went. The bishop was startled. A curate careering about the country on a couple of wheels did seem out of place. So his lordship wrote to the rector of Oakbury on the subject, and the rector handed the letter to Sylvanus. So far as he, the rector, was concerned, his curate might have flown about on a broom-stick if by so doing he kept the bother of the parish off his superior's hands.

Mr. Mordle, who was unable to see that his ordination vows debarred him from using such a convenient vehicle for getting from one end of the parish to another, did a bold thing. Knowing that the bishop was staying at a country house some

twenty-five miles away, he threw himself early one morning into the saddle or the seat, and used his nether limbs to such purpose that just before lunch-time his card was sent in to his lordship, and in ten minutes the bishop was gravely inspecting what Mrs. Pierrepont, when speaking to her friends, called a diabolical machine.

For some minutes the bishop stood on the door-steps, weighing the innocence or guilt of the inanimate creature at his feet, Sylvanus the while pleading its cause with his usual brisk vehemence and jerky dexterity. He expatiated on the size of his parish, and on the wonderful assistance he derived from this modern invention for getting quickly over the ground. He showed his lordship the convenient little bag attached to the back, in which he carried his books of devotion, or, when occasion needed, some small creature comfort for the aged sick. He explained the action of the machine, and so raised the episcopal curiosity, that an unheard-of thing occurred. His lordship, gaiters and all, gravely installed himself in the seat, and, to the unutterable delight of several ladies and gentlemen who were gazing through the drawing-room windows, in a quiet, dignified, leisurely way, as behoves a bishop, actually propelled his sacred self down the gravel path and up again, with no

further damage than cutting up the edges of his host's lawn, and knocking a couple of stones out of a rockery. The tricycle triumphed! Although the bishop did not embody an eulogistic notice of it in his next charge to his clergy, he has been known, on several occasions, to recommend its use in outlying districts.

Like many other useful innovations, Sylvanus and his tricycle lived down prejudice, and were able to accompany each other to Hazlewood House this particular afternoon in July.

The "Tabbies" had driven into Blacktown; but Miss Clauson was in the back garden. Sylvanus pulled his tricycle aside, so that it should be out of the way of other callers; then went to meet what fate had in store for him. Poor fellow, he breathed a prayer as he crossed the lawn. He had really very little hope; but he felt he must make his confession before he struck his flag altogether.

It was a warm July afternoon. Beatrice, in a dainty white dress, looked deliciously cool as she sat reading in the shade of a sycamore tree. She smiled pleasantly when she saw her visitor approaching. Sylvanus would have given all he possessed to have seen her eyes drop shyly—to have noticed a blush rise to her cool white cheek. Mrs.

Miller, the nurse, sat with the little boy on her lap some short distance off.

After the first greeting, Sylvanus fetched one of those comfortable carpet-seated chairs, several of which were scattered about, and sat beside Beatrice. They talked for a while on ordinary subjects; then, like a man, the curate resolved to come to the point.

"I wish to say a few words to you alone, Miss Clauson. Will you walk into the house or the other garden with me?"

She looked surprised, perhaps troubled. "We can speak here," she said, telling the nurse to take the child indoors. She kissed the little man tenderly as he was led away.

"You are very fond of the child," said Sylvanus.

"Very, very fond of him." Then she turned her clear grey eyes upon him as one who waited for a promised communication. He knew all was lost—or rather nothing had been his to lose. But he went on to the bitter end.

"Miss Clauson—Beatrice—" he said. "I have come to-day to ask you if you could love me—if you will be my wife?"

She did not answer. He fancied he heard her sigh; yet that sigh gave him no hope.

"That I love you, I need not say. You must have seen that. In my own clumsy fashion I must have shown it."

"I feared it was so," said Beatrice dreamily.

"Yes, it was, always will be so. Even as I speak, I speak with little hope; but at least you will hear and believe I love you."

His voice was so deep and earnest she scarcely recognised it. He looked at her. Her lashes were cast down and tears were forcing their way through them.

"Will you answer me?" he said tenderly. "I do not insult you by speaking of wealth or rank in the world. If you loved a man you would care little for that. You would marry the man you loved in spite of all the world."

She shivered. Her mouth worked piteously. For a second a wild joyful thought ran through the wooer's mind—for a second only.

"Do I judge you rightly?" he asked.

"I think so—but, oh, Mr. Mordle, I am so sorry for this."

Her accent left no doubt as to the genuineness of her regret. Had she wronged him to the greatest extent, it could not have been more real.

So like a man he took his answer. He rose. His face was pale, but then, a man's face is, so far

as colour goes, beyond his control. But his manner and words were his own bond-servants.

"We can still be friends?" he jerked out in a very good imitation of his usual brisk manner.

"If you wish it," said Beatrice, quietly, almost humbly.

"Of course I wish it. By the bye, will you wish me a pleasant holiday? I am going away next week. France, Switzerland, Rhine — all the rest of it."

Beatrice laid her hand on his arm. "Don't, please, speak like that; you make me miserable."

"Miserable!"

"Yes. Do you think a woman does not feel unhappy when she finds she cannot accept the love of a good man like yourself? Do you think she believes he goes from her side and forgets all that has happened? I don't think I am to blame, Mr. Mordle, but anyway I feel miserable."

He took her hand. "No, you are not to blame. I was a fool. Never mind, I am a man also. I really was going away next week, unless — well, never mind what. When I come back, if I am not cured of my folly, I can at least promise that even you will not see any symptoms of disease. Good-bye."

He turned and left her. Even in his desolation

he had the grain of comfort that he had not borne himself amiss. To Miss Clauson, at least, he must always stand far above his unfortunate name.

Still he was terribly upset. So much so that he walked to the end of the lane without remembering his tricycle, and was compelled to retrace his steps in order to recover his artificial means of propulsion. He felt this to be a peculiarly unfortunate incident, for, as he walked up to the house, he caught a glimpse of Beatrice standing in a pensive, thoughtful attitude, gazing out of one of the windows. Nevertheless he mounted his metal steed bravely and sped away.

By the unwritten canons of art, it seems to me that a rejected suitor is expected, if a horseman, to dash his spurs into his charger's flanks and gallop away, anywhere, anywhere! — if a pedestrian he should rush off in a frenzy, stride off with dignity, or lounge away with studied carelessness. The Rev. Sylvanus's manner of departure was certainly an impertinent invasion of comedy into the grim realms of tragedy. But in real life the two are always inextricably mingled. Only in romances do we find them kept quite apart. This is not a romance.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. MILLER TAKES A HOLIDAY.

MRS. MILLER, the respectable, middle-aged widow who had, in spite of her lack of properly authenticated service-testimonials, been installed in the place vacated by the nurse-girl whose amorous tendencies sent such a thrill through Hazlewood House, continued to give the greatest satisfaction. She was a living proof that a broom which swept clean when new, may continue to do so after the newness has departed. Moreover, Mrs. Miller was a broom which raised very little dust as it swept.

She was a pale-faced woman with strongly-marked features. The nose was aquiline, the cheeks thin, almost hollow; the mouth and chin told of a certain force of character, the eyes were dark, and at times shone with peculiar brightness. In spite of the calm, methodical way in which she went about the place in discharge of her duties, one skilled in the study of the face would have said that this woman possessed a highly nervous temperament—that her quiet was but the result of years of self-control, that

had she lacked that strong mouth and chin, Mrs. Miller's true nature would have shown itself at every hour of the day.

She was thin, and in the dark gowns which she invariably wore, looked almost ascetic. To men she presented few attractions. The under-gardener, who had been reprimanded, but not dismissed, found the change of nurses a sorry one for him. Had he wished to do so, I doubt if the most forward man-servant would have dared to put his arm round Mrs. Miller's sombre waist.

But her masters liked her, Miss Clauson liked her, the boy liked her, and, above all, Whittaker liked her. This last was an important matter, as in the servant's hall Whittaker, by virtue of long service and irreproachable character, reigned supreme.

The new nurse was in many ways a servant after his own heart. She treated him with the respect which was his due, and neither by word nor action ridiculed his masters—the crime common to nearly all the retainers of Hazlewood House. The only fault which Whittaker could find with Mrs. Miller was on account of her religious sentiments.

For Whittaker was an intelligent man, who in his hours of leisure improved his mind. For theology he read good old-fashioned, one-sided works

which proved beyond doubt that through the porch of the parish church lay the only road to Heaven. Every one knows that it is delightful to give a newcomer the benefit of one's own religious tenets—to point out where one is right and the other wrong. It was but natural that in a kindly paternal way Whittaker should take an early opportunity of ascertaining Mrs. Miller's orthodoxy.

He did this in the butler's pantry, whither she had one day come on some errand. It was on a Monday, and Whittaker began by commenting on Mr. Mordle's sermon of the preceding night. He little guessed what a storm his words would raise—how by sheer accident he had stumbled on a way of turning this calm-looking woman into a wild enthusiast. But he had, in fact, struck the fire from the flint.

She forgot all about her errand, and entered into religious discussion in a way that took the male disputant's breath from him. She talked about selection and predestination—the utter inefficacy of works or faith to save—she pounded him with terrible texts which cut off the hope of mercy from all save the elect, until poor old Whittaker fairly gasped. His one-sided studies furnished no weapons with which to meet her vehement attack. All he could do was to shake his head pityingly and sigh

for the state of her mind. In this he was little different from many reputed teachers of men.

Suddenly, as if remembering where she was, Mrs. Miller grew calm; but evidently by a great effort of self-control. She even apologised for her excitement, which she hoped Mr. Whittaker would forget. Then she left him.

In his responsible position his first thought was that his masters ought to be informed of the heterodox views held by the nurse. But this seemed scarcely fair to the woman, who, in spite of all, went to church as regularly as the other servants. So he did not mention the matter to the Talberts, but, overtaking Mr. Mordle as the latter was one day walking into the town, he, with all respect, told him what strange ideas Mrs. Miller held on religious subjects. This may seem presumption on Whittaker's part, but the truth is, that the dream of his life was, that had not fate made him a butler he might have been a clergyman. And a very imposing one he would doubtless have made.

"Ah!" said Mordle. "Calvinism—dreary religion—most dismal and dreary of all."

The curate was rather short with Whittaker. He thought the old servant rather a nuisance and somewhat of a prig.

"Will you see her and talk to her, sir?" asked Whittaker respectfully.

"No—Calvinists are incurable. But to please you, Whittaker, I'll preach at her some Sunday."

It may be presumed that Mrs. Miller did not inflict her Calvinism upon Beatrice, as the latter seemed to find the new nurse perfectly suited to her duties. It was clear that Mrs. Miller had become strangely attached to her young mistress. Nothing seemed to give her such pleasure as performing any small personal service which Miss Clauson required. When Beatrice passed her, the woman's dark eyes followed her with an expression of almost dog-like affection. On her part Beatrice treated the nurse with a consideration not always shown by the most amiable towards their servants. It was vulgarly said among the household that Mrs. Miller, quiet as she was, had managed to get the length of Miss Clauson's foot.

Whether Mrs. Miller was unduly favoured or not, things at Hazlewood House ran on smoothly. Perhaps it was the perfect order in which the gear worked that induced the nurse to take a day's holiday.

It was the day after Mr. Mordle had made and lost his venture. Horace and Herbert pottering about the gardens, saw the bright-haired boy going

out in charge of the parlour-maid. This was an infraction of rules which could not be overlooked. They demanded the cause, and were told that Mrs. Miller had gone for a day's holiday.

Of course the brothers said no more, but upon seeing Beatrice they mentioned the matter to her. "Yes," she said, "I told her she might go for the day."

The Talberts were too polite to blame Beatrice in words, but a slight elevation of four eyebrows showed their owners' discontent. Beatrice, in giving a servant a holiday, had taken a liberty.

"Where has she gone?" asked Herbert, who liked to know that his servants were spending their time properly.

"To London, I suppose," said Beatrice, carelessly.

Now the way in which Mrs. Miller spent her holiday was as follows:—

She rose at an early hour and walked from Hazlewood House to the cross roads. Here she waited until the lumbering old-fashioned 'bus came in sight. She took a seat in it, and was in due time deposited at the Blacktown station. At Blacktown she took the train to Weymouth, which fashionable watering-place she reached about eleven o'clock.

It was, however, clear that she had not come here to enjoy a day at the seaside. Instead of going at once to the gay esplanade, she sought the shades of the general waiting-room—here she remained an hour.

She then embarked in another train; one that ran on a single line of railway—ran nearly the whole of its way with the sea on one side, and a mighty hill of smooth, rounded pebbles, known as the Chesil Beach, on the other, whilst in front of it loomed tall, serrated, precipitous cliffs, at the foot of which was its destination.

Mrs. Miller paid no attention to the natural scenery of the place. She stepped from the train and walked out of the little station in a methodical, business-like way. It was evident that the woman had not come so far on a mere pleasure jaunt.

It was a burning day. The sun shot down its rays fiercely on the treeless, shadeless, barren island, or so-called island. Mrs. Miller's black garments seemed scarcely suitable to such weather—her frame certainly not strong enough to toil up those cliffs of oolitic limestone which frowned down upon her. No wonder she turned to the cab-stand. The two or three cabs which it boasted were rickety old machines, but the horses which were between the

shafts were strong ones. Horses need be strong to earn a living in this land.

She drove a bargain after the manner of her kind, then took her seat in one of the dusty vehicles. She was driven through the little grey town which lies at the foot of, and stretches a long way up the hill. The horse toiled up the steep street: on and on until the occupant of the cab looked down on the tops of the houses which she had just passed. Then a turn, and a bit of level ground, another turn and a steep hill; so on and on in a zigzag course until the table-land which lies at the top of Portland Island was somehow reached, an event which must have been grateful alike to the horse and the occupant of the cab, supposing the latter only possessed of nerves of ordinary strength, and therefore apt to rebel against being drawn up hills as steep as the side of a house.

Some time before the cab reached the top of the cliffs it had at intervals passed gangs of men working by the roadside. At a distance these men looked little different from ordinary navvies, but a closer inspection showed that the garments of most of them consisted of a dark yellow jersey covered by a sleeveless jacket of light fustian or some such material. This jacket, moreover, was stamped in various places with the government broad arrow.

Every man wore gaiters and a curiously-shaped cap, under which no hair was visible. Occasionally one might be seen who moved with a certain stiffness in his gait, as if something which he would willingly have dispensed with restrained the natural elasticity of his lower limbs. Here and there the monotony of the attire was broken by the appearance of some who were dressed in blue instead of yellow; but taken altogether the dress, if comfortable and enduring, was scarcely one which a man being a free agent would choose for himself.

The gangs which Mrs. Miller passed on the roadside were for the most part engaged in handing lumps of turf from man to man. They performed these duties in a listless perfunctory manner, although standing on the hill-side above every band of workers were two men in long dark coats with the shining buttons of authority, and each of these men held a rifle with fixed bayonet.

Farther away in the quarries could be seen many other such gangs, digging, delving, hauling, wheeling barrows, and performing other operations needful for extracting the famed Portland stone from the ground.

After passing various sentries, and driving for some distance along the level ground, Mrs. Miller's cab reached a beautiful, tall, buttressed wall; skirt-

ing this it turned at right angles and very soon drew up before an imposing entrance built of grey stone, and bearing over the archway the royal arms of England. This was the entrance to Her Majesty's prison of Portland.

In front of it, across the road, stretched the governor's garden, still brilliant with flowers, and looking like a glorious oasis in the midst of a barren land. A man who in discharge of his duties has to live on the top of Portland Island, wants a garden or something of that sort. Without it the monotony of the place would drive him mad.

But Mrs. Miller did not even look at the gay beds. She dismounted, and after telling the cab-man to wait for her, walked boldly through the prison gate.

She was immediately accosted by a portly, good-tempered-looking janitor, whose gold-laced cap spoke of superior standing. He ushered her into a little waiting-room just inside the gate, and asked her to state her business. Mrs. Miller's business was to see one of the convicts, by name Maurice Harvey.

Now, convicts are only allowed to see their friends once in six months; so the janitor shook his head dubiously. Still, as Mrs. Miller was a most respectable-looking woman, he said he would men-

tion the matter to the governor. He begged the lady to take a chair and then left her.

She sat for some time in the bare little waiting-room, the walls of which were decorated with notices requesting visitors to the prison not to offer the warders any money, but to deposit such donations as they wished to make in boxes which were hung against the wall for the benefit of discharged prisoners and the officers' schools respectively. After a while the good-natured janitor returned. He told Mrs. Miller that the convict had not seen a friend for many months, so upon his return from work he would be asked if he would like to see her. She must give her name.

She wrote it down; then waited patiently. By-and-by there was a measured tramp of many heavy feet, and she knew the convicts were returning to dinner. After the tramp had died away, a warder made his appearance and told her to follow him.

It was but a step. He opened a door in the rear of the waiting-room, and Mrs. Miller found herself in a place which could suggest nothing else than a den at a zoological garden, one side of the room being formed of iron bars about six inches apart. And opposite was a similar den with its front turned towards it and entered by another door, and between the two was a space, a narrow

den, entered by another door and containing a stool.

Presently the door of the middle den opened and a warder entered and seated himself upon the stool: then the furthest door opened, and one of the blue-habited convicts walked up to the bars, and gave his visitor a nod of careless recognition.

As a rule when a female friend is permitted to see a convict there is weeping and wailing. Hands are stretched out through the bars across the open space, and if the two persons are of ordinary stature, finger-tips may just meet. This is better than nothing. Time was when no open space divided the friends; they could kiss and almost embrace through one set of bars. But it was found that the visitor's kiss often transferred a half-sovereign from her mouth to the convict's. A kindly action, no doubt, but one which when discovered led the man into trouble, knocked off good-conduct marks, and lengthened his time of imprisonment. So now there is a space of something like five feet between the visitor and the visited.

With these two there was no weeping, no stretching out of hands. In fact, as Mrs. Miller looked at the caged creature in front of her, an expression very nearly akin to hatred settled on her strongly-marked features. Yet, in spite of his close-

clipped crown, shaven cheeks, and ugly attire, the convict was by no means ill-looking. His features were straight, and might even have been called refined. He was above the middle height, broad-shouldered, and healthy-looking. His teeth were good, and his hands, although rough and hardened with toil, were not the hands of one who has laboured from his childhood. His eyes had a cruel, crafty look in them; but this look might have been acquired since his incarceration. Indeed, Mrs. Miller had noticed the same expression in the eyes of every convict whom she had met on the road to the prison.

Mrs. Miller looked through her bars at the convict; the convict looked through his bars at Mrs. Miller; the warder between them sat on his stool sublimely indifferent, and for a while there was silence. The convict was the first to break it.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said.

"Yes, it's me," said Mrs. Miller.

"Well, what do you want? To see how I am getting on?"

He spoke quite jauntily. His visitor gazed at him scornfully.

"Oh, I'm in splendid health," he continued. "Physically, I'm twice the man I was when I came here. Regular hours, regular meals, regular work.

Constitution quite set up. No chance of my dying before my term's up."

"No, I'm afraid there isn't," said Mrs. Miller with such bitterness that the impassive warder glanced at her, and wondered what manner of prisoner's friend this was.

The prisoner's face changed. He scowled at her as darkly as she had scowled at him.

"When will your time be up?" she asked sharply. "Can you tell me?" she added, turning to the warder.

"Can't say exactly," answered the warder. "He's in blue, so he's in his last year."

Mrs. Miller shuddered. Her hands clenched themselves involuntarily.

"I want to know," she said, addressing the convict, "what arrangements you will be willing to make when you come out. That is the object of my visit."

The man looked at her mockingly. "I have thought of nothing as yet," he said, "except the joy I shall feel at once more returning to the arms of my devoted wife."

The woman's dark eyes blazed. She leant her face against the bars, and glared at the shaven face before her. "How much money do you want?" she whispered.

The convict shrugged his uninteresting-looking shoulders. "Money is an after consideration—I am pining for connubial felicity."

She turned and paced the narrow space. The warder grew quite interested in the interview. As a rule his duties were very monotonous. He recognised the fact that the present conversation was out of the ordinary run. The woman seemed to have forgotten his presence. She stamped her foot, and turned fiercely to the convict.

"Look here," she said; "will you go to America, Australia, anywhere? Money will be found."

"Certainly not," said the polite convict. "Besides, sir," he added, turning to the warder with an assumed air of deference, "I believe it is a *sine quâ non*, I mean it is indispensable, that for some time I must report myself to the police once a month?"

The warder nodded.

"God help us!" murmured the woman. Then turning to the convict, she said,—

"You'll let me know when you are released?"

"Oh, yes. I'll let you know fast enough. You'll be one of the first I shall come and see. Now, if you've nothing more to say, I'll ask to be taken back to my dinner. Good and plentiful as the fare is, I like it warm better than cold."

The stolid warder could not help smiling. The time usually allotted for an interview with a prisoner had by no means expired. It was a new experience to find a convict of his own free will curtailing his privilege. He turned inquiringly to Mrs. Miller.

"Got anything more to say to him?" he asked.

"No," she answered sullenly. The convict made her a polite bow as she turned and walked to the door of her own den. She stood outside on the gravel for a moment, and gazed moodily after No. 1080 as he was conducted by his guardian across the open space and vanished from sight round the chapel on the way to his own cell. Then she entered the waiting-room, where she found the civil official who had at first accosted her.

From him she ascertained the proper office at which the inquiry she wanted answered should be made; and upon applying there learnt that No. 1080, supposing he continued to conduct himself as he had hitherto done, that is, earning the maximum of eight good marks a day, would obtain his ticket-of-leave in about six months' time.

"Then what becomes of him?" she asked. "Do you just put him outside the gate, and tell him to be off?"

The officer smiled. "Oh dear, no. He is asked if he has any friends to go to, or where he wants

to go to. His fare is paid to that place. He is given a suit of clothes and a little money. After that he must do the best he can."

Mrs. Miller looked thoughtful. "Is there any one I could write to and ask to be told the day he will come out?" she asked.

"Certainly. If you are a relation or friend, and willing to look after him, and wrote to the governor to that effect, no doubt you would hear from him."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Miller. Then she gathered up her black skirts and left the prison. She found her cab, and was driven back to the railway station. It was some time before a train left for Weymouth; so she climbed to the top of the Chesil Beach, and sat down gazing out over the sea. Her lips moved, although the rest of her body was motionless. She was praying, and the petition she offered up was that Heaven in its mercy would remove from earth a certain convict before the day came upon which he would be entitled to demand his freedom. A curious prayer for a religious woman to make, but after all not stranger than the prayers offered up by antagonistic armies.

The train started at last, and took her to Weymouth. Here she obtained refreshment, of which, indeed, she stood much in need. Somehow she made a mistake in the time, and missed the after-

noon train. The consequence was that it was past eleven o'clock when she rang the bell of that methodically-conducted establishment, Hazlewood House. And the rule of Hazlewood House was that no servant should on any pretence be out of doors after half-past nine, or, unless the presence of company demanded it, out of bed after half-past ten.

Her masters were in waiting, and at once took her to task. She explained that she had missed the train.

"What train?" asked Horace.

"The train from Weymouth, sir."

"But Miss Clauson told us you were gone to London."

"Miss Clauson made a mistake, sir."

Horace felt nettled at the idea of any one who held even a vicarious authority from himself making a mistake. So he said, with some asperity, "This must not occur again, Mrs. Miller."

"And," added Herbert, "the next time you want a holiday kindly mention the fact to us as well as to Miss Clauson. We have a rule in these matters."

Mrs. Miller curtsied, and left the room.

"She is a curious-looking woman," said Horace. "I wonder if we were right in taking her without a character?"

CHAPTER IX.

JUMPING AT CONCLUSIONS.

MR. MORDLE went away the next week. He carried his sorrow with him, manfully resolved to do all he could to leave it on the summit of Mont Blanc or the Matterhorn, to sink it in the Lake of Maggiore or Como, or to cast it upon the flowing Rhine. He told himself with such cheerfulness as he could muster that he was deeply wounded but not killed. Before he tied the label on his portmanteau he discharged what his keen sense of honour told him was a duty. He called on the Talberts and informed them how he had fared with Beatrice.

They were very busy bottling off a quarter cask of sherry. They found that buying their wine in wood saved them, Heaven knows how much. Now, bottling wine is a nice, dignified, yet, withal, cheerful operation, in the performance of which a duke need not be ashamed to be seen. If I had the wine to bottle I would work at it ten hours a day. So when the brothers heard that Mr. Mordle wished

particularly to see them, he was asked to step down into the cellar.

Into the cellar he went. Not a bad place on such a sultry day. He found Horace seated on a low stool with his long straight legs spread out on either side of the cask, in something of the attitude of a reversed Bacchus. He was filling the bottles with the golden fluid, whilst Herbert stood near him, and after dipping the corks into a little basin full of wine manipulated them with a cork-squeezer, and eventually drove them into their resting-place by aid of a small spade-shaped mallet. As each bottle was filled, corked, and put aside, Herbert made a chalk mark on a board, and every fourth mark he crossed with another, so that the tally could be easily counted. The whole performance was beautifully methodical and business-like, reflecting great credit on the actors.

With their native politeness, the moment Mr. Mordle came in sight they ceased their occupation. Horace turned the tap and rose from the half-filled bottle, Herbert left the cork half driven in. They greeted their visitor and apologised for bringing him down to the lower regions. Although they wore large coarse white aprons fashioned somewhat like a girl's pinafore, they looked two well-bred gentlemen.

"I say," said the curate nervously, "you know I'm off the day after to-morrow."

"Yes. We wish you a pleasant trip."

"Thanks. Sure to enjoy myself. I want to tell you something before I go." They begged him to speak. They thought it was some petty parish matter on his mind.

"Do you mind taking off your aprons for a minute? Somehow my news doesn't seem to fit in with them."

Mr. Mordle was a privileged person. He could say and do what few others could. Moreover, his manner showed them he had something of importance to communicate.

Without a word they untied their pinafores, folded them up, and laid them across the sherry cask.

"Shall we go up-stairs?" asked Horace.

"Oh dear, no. This will do capitally. What I want to tell you is this. Last week I asked Miss Clauson to marry me. She refused. Thought you ought to know."

Horace looked at Herbert; Herbert looked at Horace. They stroked their beards meditatively, but for some time neither spoke.

"Well," said Mr. Mordle, "that's all."

"I think, Mordle," said Horace sadly, "you should have consulted us first."

"Quite so," said Herbert.

"Don't see it at all. Miss Clauson is of age. But it doesn't matter—I tell you now."

The brothers shook their heads gravely.

"I tell you," said Sylvanus, "because I'm going away to cure myself. When I come back I should like to be able to visit you as before. You needn't be afraid."

"Miss Clauson must decide," said Horace.

"Exactly so," said Herbert.

So the matter was left, and Mr. Mordle went away on his hard-earned holiday with a clear conscience if a heavy heart.

The brothers returned to their fascinating occupation, and worked away for some time in silence. Three dozen of sherry must have been bottled before Horace spoke.

"It is time Beatrice was married."

"Yes," said his brother; "but she isn't a marrying girl. She takes after us, I think."

There was always a comfort in this reflection; especially now, when the fame of Miss Clauson's good looks had spread through half Westshire.

It was indeed time that a suitable suitor made his appearance. The chances were that in a year or two the girl might fall into her uncles' old-maidish ways. For the Talberts were now getting

into a domestic groove down which it seemed likely they would slide until the end of their lives. They had of course seen the great world and the vanities thereof, and now they found that there was nothing like home, sweet home—especially when the disposition of the home-lover is such that he takes an immense interest in every detail which makes up that sweetness. With the exception of the perennial visit to town, they had not left Hazlewood House for any length of time since they settled down to rule its fortunes. They went to London this year for the last week in May and the whole of June. But Miss Clauson did not accompany them. She said outright that she hated London, and loved Oakbury and its belongings. So at Oakbury she stayed. A very curious choice on the part of a young lady who might, had she wished to do so, have spent the London season mingling in the pursuits and gaieties of what is called the upper circle.

However, her decision was a certain relief to her uncles. Had she selected to accompany them to town, they would hardly have known what to do with her. A handsome niece staying with them at their hotel would be—well, if not a nuisance, a responsibility. Approving as they did in the main of her treatment of Lady Clauson, they could not

counsel her to go to her father's house. There were, of course, many families they knew who would have been glad to have taken charge of a niece of theirs, but Beatrice's staying at another establishment whilst Sir Maingay was in town would clearly show the world that there was a family feud. Nothing in the Talberts' eyes was worse than a proclaimed family feud. Hence it was that even now they spoke of Beatrice as only being on a visit to them. This delicacy on their part was a costly matter, for had they brought themselves to consider the girl as part of the house, they might with perfect justice and propriety have associated her with themselves in the June audit, so giving Horace another opportunity of showing his skill in accounts and estimates.

So when Miss Clauson refused to go to London she extricated her uncles from a dilemma. She stayed at Hazlewood House, and for five weeks ruled Whittaker and the other staid servants as well as she could.

The Talberts had now settled down for the remainder of the year. Autumn or winter would make little difference to them. They were not, as may easily be imagined, enthusiastic sportsmen. Sometimes they accepted an invitation for a day or two's shooting; but that acceptance depended

more on the quality of the host than on that of the sport. Although when they did shoot, they shot fairly well—as they did most other things—it may be taken for granted that their knowledge of the proper treatment of game was more valuable when the game was lying in the larder than when it was flying or running about. They could advise you how to baste a hare much better than how to shoot him. So it was that after their visit to London they looked upon themselves as pretty well fixed at Hazlewood House until the next spring.

Beatrice was now just past twenty-two. It really was high time that a suitor came, and the "Tabbies," who could easily have adapted their feminine gifts to match-making, began to think over the eligible young men in the county.

Then Fate produced some one, whom, until now, she had kept in the background. But whether eligible or not is a matter we must discover by-and-by.

Beatrice entering the library one morning early in August found her uncles in high conclave. She saw at once that something had happened, and for the moment feared to hear that the red-currant jelly recently made from their own receipt, and almost under their own supervision, had turned mouldy. It was not that Miss Clauson was par-

ticularly fond of red-currant jelly, her fears were simply on account of the distress such a catastrophe would cause her uncles' kindly natures. However, the matter was not so serious as she imagined.

Uncle Horace handed her an open letter. "Read that, my dear, and tell us how we shall answer it." She read the following:—

"Dear Mr. Talbert. You and your brother have several times asked me to pay you a visit. May I come for a week or two this vacation? I am rather knocked up by hard work, and my doctor tells me I had better spend some time in a quiet place in the country. So I remembered your kind invitation; and if quite convenient to you, would come straight from Oxford to your house. Of course, although rather overworked, I am not an invalid or I should not think of trespassing on you. Yours sincerely, Frank Carruthers."

"Who is Frank Carruthers?" asked Beatrice. "Some relation to us, is he not?"

"His mother was my father's half-sister."

"What relation does that make him to me?"

Herbert stroked his beard and grappled with the problem. "He must be your half first cousin once removed," he said at last.

"Exactly so," said Horace.

This point being settled, Miss Clauson requested

further information about Mr. Carruthers. Thereupon Horace went into family history, which it will perhaps be better for us to look up on our own account. On such occasions Horace was apt to become rather prosy.

Old Talbert's half-sister, who was some years younger than himself, married, just before the successful coup came off, a man named Carruthers. It was no great match, and if Mr. Carruthers found domestic bliss it was well that he made his matrimonial arrangements before the "boom" in oil, tobacco, corn or whatever it was, sent Mr. Talbert to Hazlewood House and county society. Had he deferred it till then the chances are that Mr. Talbert would have insisted on his sister doing better; for Carruthers had only a moderate fixed income, as manager of some works in the north.

Somehow, after her marriage his half-sister slipped away from Mr. Talbert's life. As whole sisters and brothers so often do the same this fact is not astonishing. Mrs. Carruthers had several children—but one after another they died off. She wrote to her half-brother announcing the birth or the death of each. He answered her letters in a congratulatory or consolatory way as the occasion required. This was about all the correspondence which passed between them. When Horace and

Herbert were lanky boys in Eton jackets and round collars, Frank Carruthers was born, and actually lived long enough to give promise of growing up. Indeed, his father before he died saw his only surviving child a strapping young fellow of seventeen.

Mr. Carruthers left his widow an annuity for life and a few hundreds in ready money. She lived well within her income, and expended her capital in finishing her son's education. She may have had some of old Talbert's views of things in general although lacking his means of carrying them out. Anyway she sent her boy to Oxford. There, for three or four terms he behaved disgracefully.

He got into scrapes, difficulties, and debt. So far, indeed, into the last that his mother for the first and only time in her life, applied to Mr. Talbert for assistance. This was given readily, and the young man was once more set off straight.

Then suddenly Mrs. Carruthers died. Out of her annuity she had saved enough each year to pay a premium of assurance, and Frank, then just twenty-one, found that her foresight and love put him in possession of some seventeen hundred pounds.

Whatever his faults, might have been he was

passionately attached to his mother. Her death seemed to make a changed man of him. He immediately paid back Mr. Talbert's loan—better still, he went to work like a horse—an intellectual horse, of course. The consequence was that he became one of the most shining lights of his year, and was, in due time, rewarded by a fellowship.

This was lucky; for after having repaid Mr. Talbert he had only enough money left to carry him to the end of his Oxford course.

Eventually he settled down to try and make his living, or augment the emoluments of his fellowship, as an Oxford "coach." At that particular time the supply of coaches was beyond the demand, so for some years, in spite of his brilliant reputation, passengers—or pupils—were few. But he stuck to the business, and latterly had been given as much, even more, than he could manage. Hence the overwork.

All this uncle Horace told Beatrice in his own fashion—all except the wild-oat episode. That was past and gone; Frank was now a successful man, so his youthful sins might be forgotten.

Beatrice until now knew nothing about her fractional cousin. An intermittent and languishing correspondence had existed between her mother

and Mrs. Carruthers, but upon the death of his first wife Sir Maingay had not the least interest in keeping up any form of relationship with Mrs. Carruthers. It is doubtful whether he even knew of her existence. The Talberts, who were far too proud to disown any of their kin, had met the young man several times and had liked what they had seen of him. They had asked him to Oakbury, and after excusing himself once or twice he was now coming there.

"Is he a clergyman?" asked Beatrice. "He must be, I suppose."

"No," said Herbert. "He never took orders. The fellowship he holds did not make that indispensable."

"They ought all to be like that," said Beatrice. "Men oughtn't to be forced or bribed to enter the Church. Besides," continued she, "they ought not to make a man give up his fellowship when he marries. Just as he wants more money they take it from him. He must either give up his wife or his income."

Miss Clauson was growing quite a philosopher on the subject of marriage. She spoke about it as if it were an impossibility that she herself would ever be interested in the matter.

"My dear," said Uncle Horace, gallantly, "I don't

think a man would consider two hundred a year a great sacrifice if you were in the question."

She smiled faintly at the compliment. "Still the system must be bad," she said. "It might lead to all sorts of unhappiness. A man might keep his marriage a dead secret—might not marry at all. All sorts of misery might result."

"You may be sure," said Herbert, "what is—is best."

"Exactly so," said Horace.

"I am sure it is bad," she said, decisively.

Miss Clauson must have been in advance of her day, the authorities now having in a great measure adopted her views and changed the system.

"Shall we write and tell him to come?" asked Horace. "It won't be any annoyance to you?"

"Why should it be — what difference will it make? Ask him by all means."

Then, hearing the patter of little feet outside, she left her uncles to answer their letters, and in a few minutes was out in the garden romping with the child.

Horace wrote a beautifully-worded letter to Frank Carruthers, expressing the pleasure he and his brother felt at hearing of the promised visit. He begged him to fix his own day for coming and to stay as long as he conveniently could. The letter

was handed to Herbert for perusal and approval. Herbert read it, and after nodding his head continued to hold the letter in his hand, whilst a kind of puzzled, thoughtful look spread over his face.

Strange to say Horace also fell into a reverie. For some ten minutes the two brothers sat facing one another, stroking their beards. If that vulgar wretch from whose rank mind that feline nickname first sprung could have seen them he would, I am afraid, have been quite satisfied that he had chosen an appropriate designation, when he dubbed them the Tabbies.

Herbert and Horace knew without speaking that their thoughts were running in parallel lines. They often thought of the same thing without a previous word on the subject. The similarity of their natures, no doubt, accounted for this.

"Herbert," said Horace at last, "you are thinking of what Beatrice said?"

"Yes, I am."

"So am I. It seemed a revelation, but we oughtn't to jump at conclusions."

"No," said Herbert, "but the fact remains. Some four years ago he had nothing but his fellowship to live upon."

"You are right, nothing. Beatrice spoke justly. She may by chance have struck the mark."

"I am afraid so. Still, we must not be hasty. Yet, whoever sent the child, must have fancied it had some claim on us."

"It is ridiculous to suppose that an entire stranger would have done such a thing."

"Quite so," said Herbert.

"He may have been much tempted; at that time have been driven to his wits' end. It is a sad affair—let us try and piece it together."

Then, like a couple of old women, they began to construct their new theory.

"We will say," began Horace, "he was married four years ago."

"Yet was dishonourable enough to conceal it; so that he might hold his fellowship."

"Of course this is all supposition," said Horace. The word dishonourable in connection with one of his own kin grated on his ear.

"Exactly so," said Herbert. "I should suspect that the wife died — perhaps recently, perhaps shortly after the birth of the child."

"The latter I should think. Frank makes a large income now, and could afford to give up two hundred a year."

"Yes," said Herbert, "the wife died after the birth of the boy. The older the child got the more trouble he found it to conceal its identity. Thereupon he sends it to us, trusting we may keep it."

"And now," capped Herbert, "after declining former invitations, he comes to us himself. The further we pursue the matter the clearer it becomes."

They were quite in a state of mild excitement. That they could draw logical inferences we have seen by the affair of Ann Jenkins' stockings. The brothers had both been distressed that all their speculations as to little Harry's origin had fallen to the ground for want of proper support. Now, at last, was a theory which, if it reflected dishonour on a connection of theirs, was at least tenable. It was improbable, but the whole affair was so monstrous that it needed an improbability to account for it. They absolutely argued themselves into believing they had found the truth.

"Didcot is the junction for Oxford," continued Herbert, after a pause.

"Besides," said Horace, "we cannot forget that his conduct once was not what it should have been."

That's the worst of going wrong. No amount of straight running will make people cease to look at times askance. The work of reformation is child's play to that of making your friends believe you have reformed.

Therefore Horace Talbert's remark was a clincher. Herbert toyed with the open letter.

"Shall we send this?" he asked.

They fell to stroking their beards once more, and continued the operation until the natural kindliness of their hearts reasserted itself.

"After all," said Herbert, "it is all purely conjectural."

"Completely so."

"He had better come then."

"I think so. Besides, it will give us an opportunity of seeing him with the child—surely the instincts of paternity must show themselves."

"They are supposed to be very strong."

But as neither of them knew anything about paternity, these remarks were made in a doubtful tone, and were subject to correction.

The polite letter was sent, and a week after the ending of the Trinity Term the young Oxford tutor packed up his things, and started for Oakbury.

As there is no occasion to make superfluous mysteries, it may at once be said that Frank Carruthers knew no more of the existence of the child whom his amiable uncles had argued themselves into believing to be in some way his property, than he knew of—for the sake of a simile—say the presence at Hazlewood House of a grey-eyed girl, whose beauty would satisfy every demand of his rather fastidious taste.

CHAPTER X.

THE FRACTIONAL COUSIN.

Miss Clauson showed very little interest in the approaching visit. To this curious and, at times, almost apathetic young woman it seemed as if all young men were alike, although we have seen that she was capable of showing strong feeling and emotion, as when she rejected Mr. Mordle's love.

The only sentiments Miss Clauson felt about Frank Carruthers were these. She was rather glad he was not a clergyman, and rather sorry he was a sort of cousin. She was not very partial to clergymen, and she thought that male cousins were apt to presume on their relationship. Perhaps they do.

She had not even the interest which falls to the lot of hostess in preparing for the arrival of a guest. Herbert himself had seen that the large feather-bed in the chintz room had been carried down and aired at the kitchen fire. He had with his own hands given out the needful blankets, counterpanes, sheets, and pillow-cases, had even looked to the match-box and pincushion.

So, with something akin to indifference, Beatrice saw the lodge gate open, and Horace bring the horses and large wagonette up to the door. She noticed that the young man who sat beside him looked rather pale and washed out. She saw several portmanteaus handed out, so came to the conclusion he intended making a long stay. Then she resumed the book she was reading. It was far more interesting than any young man.

Nor was she disturbed for some time. It was close upon the dinner, indeed Beatrice was already dressed; so the Talberts took their guest to his room, and left him to make his evening toilet. Just before the gong sounded the three men entered the drawing-room, and Frank was duly presented to Miss Clauson.

When a young man and woman know it is their fate to spend several weeks together in a country house, and when there is a family connection between them, it is no use commencing by being distant to one another. At least, so thought Frank Carruthers, for he shook hands with Miss Clauson, and began talking to her as if he had known her all his life. Beatrice felt certain he meant to presume on his relationship.

Still she was very civil and kind to him, and welcomed him to Oakbury. By-and-by, in the

course of his easy conversation, he made what struck her as being an original remark. What it was is not recorded, but as original remarks grow scarcer every day, any young man who makes one a minute after his first introduction to a young lady is something out of the common run. So Beatrice, for the first time, really looked to see what he was like. You may depend he had made up his mind about her looks at once.

He was pale, and appeared thin and overworked. By the side of Horace and Herbert he seemed a short, slight man, although he was quite middle height, and if thin had plenty of muscle. He was very handsome in his own style, and had a clever, intellectual look in his face. His eyes were dark and keen—not restless eyes, yet seemed to glance at everything quickly, and enable him in a second to make up his mind about the object at which he looked. There was an expression hovering about his mouth which a physiognomist would have told you hinted at sarcasm, and his chin proclaimed that he had a will of his own.

By the time Beatrice had finished her survey, and before she had come to any decision, except that he was by no means ill-looking, the gong sounded. Horace offered his arm to his niece, and led her to the dining-room, followed by Herbert and Frank.

They dined at a round table, pulled almost up to the window. It was pleasant at this time of year to be able to look out on the garden. If everybody knew the comfort of a round table when the party is small, the whole stock in the country would be at once bought up.

After all, in spite of his pale face, there seemed little the matter with Mr. Carruthers. His appetite was a fair one; but if a man could not make a good dinner at Hazlewood House his interior organisation must be in a state past redemption. So he ate like a hale man and talked like one whose brain was in full working order.

"It's very good of you to take charge of an invalid like me," he said across the table to Beatrice.

"You must thank my uncles. I am only a visitor like yourself, Mr. Carruthers."

"And both very welcome," said Horace courteously.

"Exactly so," said Herbert.

"By the bye," said Frank turning to Horace, "tell me what I shall call you and your brother. Mr. Talbert seems too stiff—Horace and Herbert too familiar. I could, like Miss Clauson, call you uncle, if you liked; but you are not old enough."

"I think as we are cousins we had better use the Christian name simply."

This was a great concession on their part. Only persons like Lady Bowker, who had known them from boys, called the Talberts by their Christian names.

"Thank you," said Frank. "Now enlighten me as to my relationship to Miss Clauson."

Herbert explained the matter.

"Half first cousin once removed. An unknown quantity. If I were a mathematician I would try to express it in figures. It doesn't seem much, but it's better than nothing."

Beatrice felt sure this young man meant to include her in the arrangement just made with her uncles. She was wrong; it was many days before he called her anything except Miss Clauson. Love always should begin in a most respectful manner.

Then the Talberts, who had the knack of always interesting themselves in their guest's affairs, and who were, moreover, capital listeners, asked him questions about his life at Oxford.

"Life!" he said; "it can scarcely be called life. All term time from nine in the morning to nine at night I try to fill up a vacuum—created by nature, but which nature does not seem to abhor—in young fellows' brains. You look upon a tutor's calling as rather an intellectual one, don't you?"

"Naturally we do."

"Then be undeceived. A man who keeps a shop requires far greater gifts. He has a variety of things to sell, and a variety of customers to send away equipped with what they want. My customers are all the same—my wares don't vary. I assure you, Miss Clauson, the dull, level stupidity of the typical undergraduate is appalling."

"Then it needs a clever man to improve them."

"Perhaps so—but clever in what? Not in learning. Clever in knowing what they are likely to be asked in examination. Clever in cutting off all superfluous work. As for the learning, the tutor need only be a page ahead of his pupil, and that does not constitute a supreme effort. Did you ever see a firework manufactory?"

He asked Beatrice this. It seemed a sudden departure from the subject. Of course she had never seen a firework manufactory.

"Well, they ram this and that into the empty cases. So do I. Saltpetre—Latin. Sulphur—Greek. Charcoal—history. Balls of coloured fire—various information. I ram and ram. The case is full and in place. The examiner applies the match and looks for the result. Then——"

"They burst in the wrong place," said Beatrice slyly. She was amused.

"Yes—many of them—burst and scatter the unburned charge to the winds in a ludicrous manner. Some, of course, fly straight and only come down like sticks after fulfilling their appointed tasks."

"But some succeed like yourself," said Horace.

"My dear Horace!" Frank fell into the Christian name arrangement with the greatest ease. "The more I see of undergraduates the humbler I grow. I was successful, but if my competitors were like those I coach it's nothing to be proud of."

"Yet your learning brings these pupils to you."

"Not a bit of it. I have a knack of bringing dull fellows on, that's all."

"And perhaps the reason why you get all the dull fellows," said Beatrice.

"There's something in that," said Carruthers, laughing.

"You read Latin?" said Frank, suddenly turning to Beatrice.

"Yes. How could you tell?"

He laughed and gave her one of his quick glances.

"There is a little line between your brows—a very little one. Young ladies always knit their brows when they study hard. Latin for a lady is hard study."

"Other things besides study bring lines," said Beatrice, rather coldly.

"Yes—trouble. But you can have had none. Pride may bring them. You are proud, but not severely proud. So I am right."

Certainly this young man was presuming. Beatrice, half displeased, said nothing.

"Won't you have some more champagne, Frank?" said Horace, noticing the young man declined Whittakers' mute offer of refilling his glass.

"No, thank you. I drink very little: although your wine is enough 'to shake the sternness of an anchorite.'"

"That is Byron, is it not?" asked Herbert.

"Byron misquoted," said Beatrice quietly. Frank gave her a quick glance.

"Are you sure?" he said.

"Certain. I looked it up last week. It is 'saintship' not 'sternness.'"

"I looked it up some months ago. No; I remember, I couldn't find the book, so trusted to my memory. I was wrong it seems."

"Homer sometimes nods," said Horace.

Beatrice was looking rather inquisitively at Frank. "What did you want the quotation for?" she asked.

"For—something or another—I forget now. As

soon as I am allowed to work my brain I'll try and remember."

"Don't trouble—I know. I saw the misquotation last week."

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course you wrote the paper," continued Beatrice.

"You are provokingly acute, Miss Clauson."

"What did Frank write?" asked Horace.

Beatrice smiled. She felt she was now going to take her revenge for Mr. Carruthers's remark about the Latin.

"That paper in the *Latterday Review* on landowners' responsibilities," she said demurely.

"Nonsense, Beatrice! Frank couldn't have written that. Did you?" continued Horace, more doubtfully, seeing his guest manifested no horror at the accusation.

"Young ladies should not read the *Latterday*," said Frank.

"Anonymous writers should not misquote," retorted Beatrice.

"But *did* you write it, Frank?" asked Herbert.

The two brothers looked the picture of anxiety. Frank laughed.

"Miss Clauson is horribly acute," he said.

Therefore they all understood that Mr. Car-

ruthers was the author of the article in question, an article which, from the bold and original views it ventilated, had attracted a great deal of attention. Horace and Herbert looked aghast.

"Frank," said the former in a solemn voice, "you must be a radical."

"You must," said Herbert sorrowfully.

Even the respectable Whittaker, who had listened to the conversation, pulled a long face, and seemed to say to himself "he must be a radical." That his masters' cousin should so disgrace the family was very distressing.

"Oh dear, no," said the culprit. "I'm not—are you, Horace?"

The utter absurdity of the question made them all laugh. Horace and Herbert thanked Heaven they were not radicals.

"But there are respectable radicals, are there not?" asked Frank innocently.

"A few," said Horace. Sad as the truth was, he was obliged to confess that there were one or two radicals of his acquaintance whose social position raised them above consideration of their political creed. It was a fault in what was otherwise a fairly well-organised world. It was a satisfaction to have Frank's word that he was not a radical. They told him so gravely.

"I fancy Mr. Carruthers is a communist," said Beatrice mischievously.

"Then my expressed opinion of your shrewdness suffers."

"But what are your views, Frank?" asked Horace.

"I have none in particular. I am willing to be guided by the best authorities—yourselves, for instance. Tell me why you hate radicals so?"

"They are so—so—un-English."

"Ah. Then I detest them. Now you know what I am. I am English. Are you English, Horace?"

They told him solemnly they hoped and believed they were English to the backbone; but they told themselves they were Englishmen with insular excrescences rubbed off by foreign travel.

"Yes," said Frank, "it's a great thing to be English. Few people realise what it means. I do most thoroughly."

"That's right," said Horace. In spite of the landowner article, he was growing quite easy about his guest.

"I would pass a law," said Frank gravely, "making it penal for any Englishman to learn a word of a foreign tongue. Every time an English child conjugates a French or German verb he retards the millennium."

"The millennium!" said Beatrice, astonished.

"Yes—my idea of the millennium—which is when the whole civilised world speaks English. If we could only converse in our own tongue, every nation would be forced to learn it, and so hasten the happy day. Wherever the English language gets a good footing, it conquers."

"Of course you speak only your own language?" said Beatrice. She was by now getting quite interested.

"In my ignorance of what was right I learned one or two others. I am trying to forget them, but I can't do so."

"Well, in what other way would you show your patriotism?" asked Horace, who was amused.

"I would cling to every bit of foreign land we acquired, whether gained by force, fraud, purchase, or discovery. I wouldn't think whether it paid to keep it or not. It must benefit the original owners to become Anglicised; and whatever place it is, it is sure to come in useful some day."

"No wonder you hate radicals," said Herbert, approvingly.

"Well, what else?" asked Beatrice. He had been for the most part addressing his remarks to her, so she had a right to ask.

"Lots more. But, as we are also English, let

me ask you a question. Doesn't it sometimes jar upon your pride to think that we are obliged to anoint full-blooded Germans as our kings and queens? How much English blood has the Prince in his veins?"

That was a very startling question. The Talberts immediately began to run down the Royal Family-tree. Frank took a piece of bread.

"I'll show you by an illustration," he said. "You'll be frightened. Here's James the First," he pointed to the bread. "Here is his daughter Sophia," he cut the bread in half. "Here's George the First," he cut the bread again. "Here's George the Second," cutting again. "Here's George the Third," cutting again. "Here's Edward, Duke of Kent," cutting again. "Here's the Queen, God bless her," cutting again. "Here's Albert Edward, Heaven preserve him!" He cut the bread for the last time, and sticking the tiny morsel that remained on a fork, gravely handed it to Beatrice.

"It's a mortifying state of things, isn't it," he asked, "for those who are so thoroughly English as ourselves? Don't you sympathise with the Jacobites, Miss Clauson?"

"I think you are talking rank treason," said Beatrice. She scarcely knew whether he was in jest or earnest. Perhaps he didn't know himself.

The dinner proper was just over. Whittaker

came in with the crumb-brush, and swept away James the First and his descendants through the female side. As soon as the wine was placed on the table the door was opened, and Beatrice's little boy trotted into the room. He was allowed to make his appearance for a few minutes at this time whenever there was no company. The Talberts, remembering their theory, put up their eye-glasses to note the paternal instinct their guest might display.

"Halloo," he cried, "another pleasant surprise." No doubt he meant to imply that Miss Clauson's presence at Hazlewood House was the first.

"Now, who is this?" he asked as the boy ran to Beatrice's side. "Will he come to me? I am really fond of children."

Tempted by the irresistible bribe of grapes the boy trotted round the table. Frank picked him up, kissed him, tickled him, stroked his golden hair, and admired him greatly, but showed none of those emotions which the Talberts imagined they would detect. In fact, the way in which he met the boy removed their base suspicions entirely. They were glad of this, although it plunged them back into darkness. They felt very friendlily disposed towards their cousin and were glad to be able to think him as honourable a man as themselves. Probably, they never really doubted this.

So in reply to his question as to whose child this merry, laughing boy was, they told him the history of his appearance, and how Beatrice had begged that he might be kept at Hazlewood House.

"I don't wonder at it," said Frank. "I wish some one would send me another just like him."

Beatrice gave him a look of gratitude. Every word that confirmed her in possession of the child was welcome to her. She had not yet looked at Mr. Carruthers in any way which carried emotion with it. Her glance was a revelation. Till then he had no idea of what dark grey eyes could express.

She soon left the men; but to rejoin them when they took a stroll round the grounds. Frank was here shown many clever little devices by which the Talberts perfected the out-of-door arrangements. He learned how they checked the consumption of corn and hay in the stables; how they regulated the amount of coke used for the hothouse. Indeed, as he was quick of comprehension and in detecting peculiarities of character, he was not so very much surprised when, having returned to the drawing-room, he greatly admired a fine piece of knotted lace, to hear that the uncompleted piece of work was not Miss Clauson's, but wrought by that accomplished artist Uncle Herbert.

CHAPTER XI.

"MORBID'S THE WORD!"

THANKS to the remarkably fine air of Oakbury, and to an absolute cessation of anything like hard work, Mr. Carruthers soon lost his jaded appearance. At the end of ten days he declared himself to be in rude health, and his looks did not belie his words. Certainly those worthy housewives, his cousins, had taken great care of him. They fed and fattened him; insisting that he should take beef tea at intervals, and that his cure should be hastened by his drinking plenty of that old '47 port for which their father's cellar had been noted. Close as the "Tabbies" were in their housekeeping arrangements, they grudged the stranger within their gates nothing.

In less than a week Frank had taken the measure of his cousins—of his male cousins, at least. He had even ceased to be seized with an almost irresistible desire to go into a secluded corner and chuckle when he saw these great men engaged in some duty which is supposed to appertain peculiarly

to womenkind; or when he heard their simple consultations on the price of meat, groceries, or other household commodities. Being, like Mr. Mordle, gifted with a vein of humour, he found the Talberts most interesting characters, but had he found their eccentricities wearisome, the kindness they showed him would have compensated for the discomfort. For in spite of the exclusiveness which they were compelled by circumstances to adopt, they were amiable, lovable men. So Mr. Carruthers took them as they were, and liked the two brothers better and better the more he really understood them.

But Beatrice was another matter. He had studied her with even more attention, but felt that the result of his studies was unsatisfactory. So far as she was concerned he knew he had got at nothing like the truth; except on one self-evident point, that she was very beautiful. When first they met her beauty struck him, but it was days before he finished finding new and fresh personal charms; perhaps he never ceased finding them. Under certain circumstances such discoveries are endless.

Frank Carruthers's studies of Miss Clauson's outward shell should therefore have been very pleasing to that young lady, had the result been made known to her, and had she cared twopence to find favour in the student's eyes. For the rest he was in a

puzzle, which he spent many hours trying to solve. Miss Clauson little thought, as she looked out of window and saw Mr. Carruthers lying on the turf with his straw hat tilted over his eyes and a thin blue stream of smoke curling up from his cigarette, that he was neither sleeping nor projecting a new political article for the *Latterday*, but thinking entirely of her own sweet self.

They had seen a great deal of one another during the last week. Frank was not a man who loved twenty-mile walks, or cared to rush from one end of a county to another to look at a rock or a waterfall. His idea of a holiday he summed up in the word "loafing!"

"A good loafer is a great rarity," he told Miss Clauson. "Loafing proper is an art which cannot be acquired. I have met with many spurious imitations, but the real article is hard to find. Show me the man who can spend a whole day like this and you show me one who can get very near to happiness."

"Like this," meant lying on his back as described.

"But you do something—you smoke," said Beatrice.

"Yes, for the sake of appearances. In these days of hard work a man mustn't be absolutely idle."

Of course she ought to have laughed at the feeble joke. But she did not. She looked down at him from her chair, and her grey eyes were annoyingly serious. In glorious August weather, when the sky is a cloudless blue, when all the trees, except the spendthrift chestnuts, are in full beauty, when roses are still budding, breaking into bloom, and succeeding their fallen fellows, a young lady has no right to look seriously at the man by her side. Certainly not Beatrice Clauson with her beauty and fortune.

Yet she looked and spoke gravely. "You wrong yourself talking such nonsense, Mr. Carruthers."

He raised himself on his elbow. "I don't talk nonsense. I am speaking of my idea of enjoying a holiday. When I work it is another matter. I trust I work to the best of my ability. When I idle, I idle to the best of my ability."

"Your idea of human happiness is a humble one."

"Is it? Then give me yours in exchange."

Beatrice was silent. She even turned her head away.

"Well, I am waiting for the definition." There was no trace of levity in Frank's voice as he spoke. His manner was as serious as her own.

"I have none to give," said Beatrice.

"None — at your age! Are your dreams all gone? Young ladies do dream, I believe. They dream of being queens of society; of marrying rich men; if they are romantic, of marrying poor men; they dream of a life of religion; of having a mission to perform. Which is your particular dream?"

"I have none," she said coldly.

"You must dream. You are sleeping now, and all sleepers dream at times. Only in the wide-awake, bustling world do people forget their dreams. They work on and on, and to some the day comes on which one of their old dreams is realised. Alas, by that time they have almost forgotten that they ever dreamed it, or they find it realised too late."

Beatrice sat silent with her eyes cast down.

"Perhaps I have not guessed the right dream for you," continued Carruthers. "I forgot you were such a learned young lady. Your dream may be the fame of the scholar or the writer."

"I have no dreams," she repeated. He looked her full in the face.

"Can you say also 'I have had no dreams?'"

She made no answer. As he looked at her he thought that even at this moment she seemed far away in dreamland. He told himself that if Miss

Clauson brought herself to assert that she had never dreamed she would be breaking the—he couldn't remember which commandment—the one about lying. By the by, is there any commandment to refrain from falsehood, except the indirect one as to "false witness"?

"Not even of rank, riches, fame, power!" he said in a lighter tone. "Miss Clauson, you are incomprehensible."

She chose to turn the subject. "I am going to the village now," she said.

"With your permission I will accompany you."

She made no objection. It is a curious fact, that in spite of his glorification of the noble art of loafing, Mr. Carruthers was always ready to go walking with Miss Clauson wherever and whenever she permitted it. But no man is consistent for twenty-four hours at a stretch.

Mr. Carruthers, in his attempted study of Beatrice's disposition, found it very hard to hit upon the word which would, so far as he as yet knew, describe its chief characteristics. That a strong element of sadness was mixed up in it he felt sure. It was just possible that this was introduced by the unfortunate differences between herself and her father. Having learnt that she had been a guest at

Hazlewood House for eight months he was shrewd enough to make a pretty correct guess at the true state of affairs. But there was more than sadness to account for. There was apathy. However the Talberts viewed it—whatever high-bred charm they fancied was vouchsafed to Miss Clauson by the bestowal of that reserved calm manner of hers, Frank knew its true nature was apathetic. It seemed strange that an intellectual girl like this had no desire, or no revealed desire, in life—no ambition, social or otherwise. From the very first he judged her character by a high standard—quite as high as that by which he judged her beauty. As their intercourse grew more familiar he found he had no reason to abate either. Naturally, Frank Carruthers, fellow of —— College, Oxford, was a clever man, and after taking so much trouble about the matter should have been able to sum up a weak woman's character correctly.

So, after a great deal of reasoning, he came to the conclusion that he had found the word to suit her. Beatrice was morbid. Every one knows that the best cure for morbidness is to awaken the patient's interest in his or her fellow-creatures—in even one fellow-creature will sometimes do.

Therefore, it was very kind of Dr. Carruthers, after such an exhaustive diagnosis, to set about en-

deavouring to effect a cure. A good action will sometimes bring its own reward.

His view of the case was greatly strengthened by noticing that Beatrice never appeared to better advantage than when she had her little boy with her. It was the interest she took in this tiny fellow-creature which made her for the time display those qualities which all unmarried men, with right ideas, so exalt in a woman—affection, kindness, and forbearance with children. Single men, if they are good and poetical—synonymous terms, I hope—are apt to think that a woman never looks more charming than when she has a child or children with her. Sometimes, after marriage, they have been known to express a wish that the association need not be so eternal.

But although Mr. Carruthers decided that Beatrice was morbid, he had still to account for the appearance of the disease in a mental constitution which ought to have been the last to have succumbed to it.

The more he tried to account for it, the more he was forced to accept, as the primary cause, one thing—a thing, even in these early days, most unpleasant and unpalatable to him. But he could not ignore the fact that young ladies who are victims to what is called an unfortunate attachment do

sometimes grow morbid, and try to make their friends believe that life for them is at an end.

So one evening, shortly after his arrival at Hazlewood House, Frank asked his hosts, of course in the most casual disinterested way, many leading questions about Miss Clauson—why she was not married, or at least engaged, and so forth. The Talberts returned their old answer that it was time she thought about it, but perhaps she took after themselves, and was not of a marrying disposition. This Mr. Carruthers ventured to doubt.

"She may have been disappointed in love," he said, carelessly. All the same he refilled from the claret jug the glass from which he had been drinking 1847 port.

"My dear Frank," said Horace, with grave dignity, "Miss Clauson would never permit such a thing to happen."

"Certainly not," said Herbert.

"Permit what? Permit herself to fall in love?"

"No; permit herself to be disappointed in love. She is far too—too well bred for such a thing to occur. When she makes her choice it will be one of which we all approve; so disappointment is out of the question."

"That's highly satisfactory," said Frank. "A

well-regulated young woman is the noblest work of —well, of modern times."

They were by now getting accustomed to him, and although rather shocked at Beatrice's being called a young woman did not show it.

"Then her choice is not yet made?" continued Frank.

"Not to our knowledge, and, I may add, not to Sir Maingay's."

Mr. Carruthers asked no more questions. He strolled out into the garden and talked quietly to Miss Clauson, until the stars showed themselves in the sky.

Having ascertained that Miss Clauson was under the charge of no other amateur doctor, Mr. Carruthers could, of course, set about curing her disease without any fear of outraging professional etiquette.

CHAPTER XII.

A HORSE! A HORSE!

It must not be supposed that no mention of any friends or acquaintances of Miss Clauson's implies that she led an isolated life at Hazlewood House. She had, indeed, plenty of both. It could hardly

be otherwise, as the Talberts were very great on the subject of the interchange of social civilities, and kept a visiting book as carefully as any lady could have done. One of Miss Clauson's friends came several times across Frank Carruthers's path about this period.

This friend, or acquaintance, was a fine hulking young fellow of about twenty, the heir to, and hope of, one of the families of position. A great good-natured, broad-shouldered boy, who would doubtless in a year or two develop into something that a mother might be proud of, and a young lady feel happy to have for a suitor. He was an Oxford undergraduate, and for a while had been one of Frank's pupils. So when he came up to Hazlewood House one morning, of course to see the Talberts, he was much surprised at finding the celebrated Oxford coach sitting at his ease just like an ordinary unlearned Philistine. He hung about the place until Beatrice appeared, and, after a while, Frank heard him ask her when he might call and go riding with her.

Although Mr. Carruthers, when inquiring into Miss Clauson's likes and dislikes, had ascertained that she was fond of riding, he had not as yet seen her on horseback. Perhaps the sharpest shaft in Love's quiver was kept to be shot the last.

The Talberts were not great at horseflesh. In the first place, they loathed a horsey man, and although, as part of a gentleman's education, they had learned to ride well, they preferred in their maturer years the carriage seat to the saddle. They had a pair of well-matched carriage horses, and recently a horse had been bought for Beatrice. After it was purchased she did not, however, make much use of it. She could not ride out unattended, and when a groom went with her it necessitated his using one of the carriage horses. So she only rode when her uncles were not going to use the carriage, or when some chance escort like young Purton offered himself.

At present her horse was in the hands of the veterinary surgeon, so there was no chance of young Purton's being gratified. Nevertheless, the account of the animal's progress towards recovery was good, and Miss Clauson hoped it would be returned to her very soon.

After this interview Mr. Purton used to ride up to Hazlewood House every morning, to learn if Miss Clauson's horse had come back. He was very anxious to hire or borrow another one for her use, but his offer was firmly declined. Perhaps, after all, Beatrice only cared for riding in a comparative way.

Frank Carruthers, when he met the young fellow, dressed in the most natty and approved equestrian costume, used to laugh and jest with him, and ask for the latest bulletins anent the convalescing steed. He knew that young Purton had once or twice ridden into Blacktown, to see what progress the invalid was making.

For his own amusement Frank would address humorous questions, clothed, for the benefit or distress of his late pupil, in elegant Latin and Greek, until young Purton fled incontinently, or boldly asserted that he ought not to be tormented before his time.

But one morning, to his inexpressible delight, he found the horse reinstalled in the Hazlewood stables, and, moreover, Miss Clauson willing to don her riding gear, and allow her cavalier to take her for a twenty-mile ride.

Frank had the pleasure of seeing the two ride away in company; young Purton feeling and showing how immensely superior a being a good horseman, intrusted with the care of a fair lady, is to the best Oxford coach who could let Greek and Latin "run out of his mouth like water, by Jove!"

Miss Clauson's appearance on horseback need not be described; but Mr. Carruthers, after watching her supple, graceful, but, alas! vanishing figure,

buried his hands in his pockets, and walked about the garden in a seemingly reflective mood. Then for a while he went back to his favourite holiday occupation of lying on the lawn and doing nothing.

Horace and Herbert by this time had finished their housekeeping, or china dusting, or whatever kept them indoors. They joined him, and laughed at his laziness. He tilted back his hat, and looked up at them sleepily.

"I say, Horace, where can I buy a horse?"

"A horse!"

"Yes. I had quite forgotten it, but my doctor insisted that as soon as I got better I should take horse-exercise."

"I didn't know you could ride."

"Yes, I can. Something, of course, very quiet. Oh, yes, I can ride until I fall off. The worst is that whenever I fall from anything, whether a horse or a ladder, I come on my head as certainly as a shuttlecock does."

"Take one of the carriage horses," said Herbert.

"We can use the dog-cart," added Horace.

"Not a bit of it. You wouldn't look well in a dog-cart. It's not a dignified conveyance enough. No. I will buy me a horse, and sell him when I leave you. I will not trust myself to a hireling. 'The hireling'—what is it the hireling does?"

"Forsakes the flock," said Herbert.

"The sheep," said Horace correctingly.

"Yes, to be sure. I am neither a sheep nor a flock, but fear the hireling would treat me badly. So tell me where to go for a horse."

"It seems great extravagance, Frank."

"Extravagance! What is extravagance? Spending more than one can afford. I am rolling in money. I am disgustingly rich. I fear not to meet either my bootmaker or my banker. Besides, in justice to my doctor, I must have his prescriptions made up, no matter what they cost."

They saw he was in earnest, so called their coachman to assist in the search for a steed. The coachman, in his striped linen waistcoat, joined the group, and waited his masters' commands.

"William," said Horace, "Mr. Carruthers is thinking of buying a horse. Do you know of anything for sale round about here?"

"Do I know of a hoss, sir," said William, reflectively.

"Something quiet," put in Herbert, who was solicitous for Frank's safety.

"A hoss—something quiet—" repeated William. "To drive or ride, sir?" he added, turning to Frank.

"To ride."

"A hoss—quiet—to ride. There's Mr. Bulger's cob, sir. His man said he were for sale."

Frank did not like the sound of Mr. Bulger's cob. Herbert and Horace thought it was just the thing.

"Well up to your weight, sir, after Mr. Bulger," said William. "Such a shoulder, such quarters, such a barrel, he've got, he have!"

"Who?—Mr. Bulger?"

"No, sir—the cob."

"Ah yes—the cob. But there are barrels and barrels. I want one with an ordinary capacity —I shouldn't care for the great tun of Heidelberg."

"Certainly not, sir," said William, touching his forelock.

"Cobs' backs are so broad," continued Frank musingly. "It seems contemptible to bestride them. The temptation to chalk one's feet and ride standing would be irresistible. Would you find it so, Horace?"

"Well—no. I don't think I should," answered Horace with that polite gravity which always amused his cousin.

"Mr. Bulger won't do, William," said Frank. "Try elsewhere."

William scratched his nose, and for a minute was in earnest thought.

"There's Captain Taylor's mare," he said, with a timid glance at his masters. "She as ran off with the stanhope and smashed it. But they *say* she goes quiet enough with a saddle on her back—leastwise if a man knows how to ride."

"We won't deprive Captain Taylor of his treasure," said Frank. "Think again."

"Will you go to Barker's repository, sir?" asked William, who had come to an end of his equine researches.

"Where is it?"

"In Blacktown," said Herbert. "We will go with you."

"No, thank you. I will make my own unbiassed choice. No one shall be blamed if I come to grief—except my doctor. Is Barker an honest man?"

"He is supposed to be so," said Horace.

"He's as honest as hoss-dealers is made," said William.

"Then I'll trust my neck in Barker's hands. I'll walk into Blacktown at once."

He went indoors and put himself into town-going trim. The brothers saw him depart with some misgivings, but as he once more declined the offer of their assistance, politeness would not let them press it.

At the lodge gate he found William waiting for him. "If I may make so bold, sir, you say to Mr. Barker that I sent you to him—William Giles, sir, Mr. Talbert's man. Barker ain't so bad as some, sir; and when he knows I shall have something to do with the hoss, may be he won't try and best you."

"Thank you, William, for your disinterested kindness," said Frank, gravely.

"Don't mention it, sir," said William, with politeness perhaps caught from his masters. "William Giles, Mr. Talbert's man—you'll remember, sir?"

"Certainly, William. Is there anything else I ought to say to Mr. Barker?"

"No, sir, not as I know of."

"Shall I tell him you deserve five or ten per cent. on the transaction?"

William's face was a study. He looked at Frank in a startled way, then glanced guiltily round to see that his masters were out of earshot. Then he looked at Frank again, and, catching the humorous twinkle in his eye, chuckled convulsively.

"Oh, Mr. Carruthers, you know the inside of the ropes, you do. If you ride as well as you reckon up, you might 'a' bought Captain Taylor's mare. Don't think Barker will take you in much, sir."

"Perhaps not; but I'd better make sure. Fetch me a nice clean straw, William." William obeyed without comment. His respect for Mr. Carruthers had greatly increased. Frank took the straw, and breaking off a piece with the empty ear attached, stuck it between his teeth. "Is that the right length, William?" he asked.

"Bit too long, sir; but you'll have chewed him down proper by the time you get to Barker's."

"All right." Frank passed out through the gate, and left William opining that he "was the rummest gent as ever came to the house: one never knew if he was in earnest or chaffing-like."

Frank soon got rid of the straw which he had mounted for William's mystification, and reached the repository without any signs of horsiness about him. He had an interview with the tight-legged proprietor, and for the next hour stood watching horses white, horses black, horses piebald, horses brown, bay, and chestnut, trotted up and down the long tan-covered way. He heard Mr. Barker eulogise each particular animal. He listened because he liked to study character—human, not equine—and was fascinated by a desire to know what Barker would find to say when each fresh screw appeared on the scene. But his silence as to his own opinion concerning the merits or de-

merits of each animal, and the calm contemplative way in which, smoking his cigarette the while, he watched the horses pass and repass, drove Mr. Barker almost to distraction. That worthy didn't know whether he had to deal with a flat or with a wiser man than himself. All business men are aware that this places one at a terrible disadvantage in a negotiation. It is annoying to find you have treated a clever man like a fool; but doubly so to find you have treated a fool like a clever man. This is one of the risks of business.

Mr. Barker was the more uncertain because he tried Frank both ways. On each of the first fifteen horses he showed him he placed a ridiculously high price—then resolving that his customer was a knowing one, he veered round, and asked a very low figure for the next score of animals paraded. Yet Frank made no sign, and Barker was quite puzzled. He even grew suspicious and glanced at Frank's legs, thinking it just possible that their owner was a horse-dealer from another town, who had come dressed like a swell, to try and take in the redoubtable Barker himself. But Mr. Carruthers's lower limbs were as straight and well-formed as if he had never in his life-time crossed a horse. So Barker was beaten, and breathed his equivalent to a sigh as the last of his five-and-

thirty screws was led back without having drawn a word of condemnation or commendation from his visitor.

"Well, you're a hard one to please, sir," he said grimly.

"I wanted to see some horses," said Frank listlessly—flipping the ash from his cigarette.

"Oh!" said Barker, with a deep-drawn breath. "You—wanted to—see—some hosses, did you?" It was only in moments of great excitement that Mr. Barker forgot himself enough to call his wares "hosses." He was a well-to-do man with daughters who played the piano. He knew that the proper pronunciation of the word raised him above the level of the grooms and stable-boys. He had acquired it with great difficulty, so its retention was precious.

"Yes, I did," said Frank pleasantly; "but never mind. Sorry to have given you so much trouble. May I give your boy half a crown?"

"Now," said Barker, cocking his head on one side and speaking in a confidential whisper, "without saying a word about the horses I have shown you, tell me what's your idea of a horse—his value, I mean."

"I'm not particular."

"Oh, you're not particular. Jim, bring out the chestnut."

"No," said Frank, "never mind. I don't want to see him. I want you to choose a horse for me."

No doubt horse-dealers are as honest as other dealers, but Mr. Barker's astonishment was indescribable. It might have been that of a convicted forger given a blank cheque and asked to take care of it, or that of a wolf to whom a sheep brought its lamb and begged that it might be looked after for a while, or that of a cat asked to stand sentinel over the cream.

Yet he was equal to the occasion. "Want me to choose a horse? Can't do better, sir. Whenever the duke or the marquis wants a horse in a hurry they write to me to send them one. S'pose if I can suit the duke, I can suit you."

"I don't know. I'm fidgety. You can try."

Still Barker couldn't feel certain whether he was dealing with a sharp man or a fool.

"There's the chestnut, I spoke of. He's the very thing for you."

"How much?" said Frank laconically.

"One hundred and twenty guineas," said Mr. Barker, with that emphasis on the last word which says that the vendor is proof against the same number of pounds.

"Look here," said Frank sharply, "you find me a horse for six weeks. I don't care if it's black,

brown, or blue. Name the lowest price you mean to take, and if the price suits me and I buy it and don't find any particular vices, I'll give you twenty per cent. more, and the horse to re-sell for me at the end of the time. Now then, is it the chestnut?"

Barker made a long pause; then with an assumption of candour said: "No, sir, after that it isn't the chestnut. You come here, I'll show you what it is."

Mr. Carruthers never told any one the exact price his horse cost him, so we will not force ourselves into his secrets. He left the repository having settled that if a veterinary surgeon's certificate could accompany the dark bay horse just shown him it might be sent to Hazlewood House that afternoon. Then he bade Mr. Barker good day and strolled back to Oakbury.

Just before he reached Hazlewood House he was overtaken by Beatrice and her cavalier. They reined up and spoke a few words. Young Purton was in high good humour, and delightfully condescending.

"Pity you don't ride, Mr. Carruthers," he said.

"It is a pity. Will you coach me? Revenge is sweet, you know."

"I'll bring my father's old horse round some morning and give you a lesson. I dare say you would soon pick it up."

"You were always a kind-hearted boy," said Frank gratefully. "Miss Clauson, do you think I could learn to ride?"

"You are too lazy, I fear."

"Yes; I suspect I am. I won't trouble you, Purton. Good-bye."

The horses trotted on, and Frank sauntered back to Hazlewood House smiling placidly.

In the afternoon, to Miss Clauson's supreme astonishment, the new purchase arrived. She and Frank were in the garden at the time. The bay was placed in Mr. Giles's charge, and that personage, after inspecting it, rejoiced for two reasons: the first, that Mr. Barker had not "bested" Frank; the second, that even if Frank had "bested" Mr. Barker, the horse must have cost a pot of money, and at whatever figure his, William's, introduction might be assessed, the backsheesh must be worth having.

"I thought you didn't care for riding," said Beatrice.

"I don't—much."

"Then why buy such a horse?"

"Because I should like to ride with you."

He gave her one of his quick glances. Beatrice turned away, ashamed to feel that she was blushing. She was very cold and reserved during the evening,

yet the audacious young man chose to take it for granted that she would accept him for her cavalier *vice* Purton superseded.

Horace having duly admired the horse and shaken his head at the palpable extravagance, made a series of elaborate rule-of-three calculations, and determined, if three horses ate a certain quantity of certain things in a certain time, how a fourth horse would affect the quantity, the things, and the time.

Young Purton was too shy to offer his escort on the next morning—he feared lest he might wear out his welcome. So his ride was a solitary one. Judge his utter disgust when, quietly trotting along, he encountered Miss Clauson and Mr. Carruthers, the latter mounted on a steed the like to which Mr. Purton had for years longed to own, and, moreover, riding as if he knew all about it.

This sight was very bad for young Purton. Had he been poetical he might have compared himself to the eagle struck down by its own quill. As it was, he muttered, "A jolly sell, by Jove!" and after the unavoidable greetings and Mr. Carruthers's inevitable bit of badinage, rode home in a disconsolate state.

CHAPTER XIII.

GASTRONOMIC AND EROTIC.

THE long vacation was running down to the lees. August had passed into September and September had softly stolen away. The scarlet geraniums, calceolarias, and other bedding-out plants which had all the summer brightened the gardens of Hazlewood House, were beginning to show signs of senile decay. The under-gardener found it no light work to keep the paths free from fallen leaves. Yet Frank Carruthers still lingered at Oakbury enjoying his cousins' hospitality. Having assumed the post of mental physician to Miss Clauson, he was no doubt reluctant to resign it until he had effected a radical cure.

Besides, the days slipped by happily enough. There were drives through the green elm-shaded Westshire lanes which lead to hills from the summits of which fine views of the country and the distant sea are obtainable. As Horace drove, and as Herbert invariably occupied the box-seat, Frank and Beatrice had the body of the large wagonette to themselves, an arrangement which one of the two found far from unpleasant.

There were the delicious rides together. Young Purton left the place in disgust and joined an eleven of old Cragtonians who were wandering about England playing matches—a far better and more healthy occupation for a boy than hopeless love-making. The bay horse turned out such a beauty that Frank broke his word to Mr. Barker and did not re-sell it.

Then there was company. Pleasant people who visited Hazlewood House, and pleasant people whom Hazlewood House visited. Frank was such a success with these that Horace and Herbert were quite proud of their cousin.

And there were walks with Miss Clauson; and above all those delightful dreamy hours when they sat under the sycamore, and in that cool shade talked of everything in the world, the heavens above, or the waters under it. Or it may be Miss Clauson was silent, and Frank, watching every line of her beautiful face, knew that the disease which he himself had taken was becoming chronic and incurable.

Altogether, it will be understood that if Mr. Carruthers failed in curing Miss Clauson's complaint it would be from no want of opportunity, or from being debarred making an exhaustive study of the patient.

In plain English, Frank had fallen in love with Beatrice, in that good old-fashioned way, almost at first sight. He had gone down before her grey eyes as surely as had the susceptible Sylvanus. Would he fare any better?

About this date he often asked himself the above question; for he had by now made the curate's acquaintance, and learned that he was a rejected man.

He did not learn it from Beatrice, who, like every true woman, wished to hide, and, if possible, forget the story of a man's discomfiture. He did not learn it from Horace or Herbert. Although they were as fond of gossip as men always are, wild horses would not have rent such a confidence from their kindly hearts. Sylvanus himself was Frank's informant.

The energetic, bustling curate had returned to Oakbury. During his absence the Talberts had requested Beatrice to decide as to the terms of intimacy which should for the future exist between Hazlewood House and Mr. Mordle. Beatrice quietly told her uncles that it was her particular wish that the Rev. Sylvanus should be received on exactly the same footing as heretofore. This decision gave the Talberts great satisfaction. They were unable to see how parochial affairs could go on unless they worked hand in hand with the curate. So when

Sylvanus returned he was informed that he might tricycle himself up to Hazlewood House as often as he chose. Which, as he was resolved to case-harden his heart by accustoming himself to seeing Miss Clauson in the light of nothing more than a friend, was very often.

So Mr. Carruthers and the curate met frequently. They recognised each other's good points and were soon on terms of friendship such as fiction, at least, seldom allows to exist between rivals. Rivals is perhaps the wrong word, for if any stray fragment of hope clung to Mr. Mordle's portmanteau, and so returned with him to England, it was swept away for ever and ever as soon as the owner saw Frank and Beatrice together. He recognised destiny, and bowed to it as a well-bred man should.

It was no doubt the desire to prove incontestably to himself that he was cured, that made him in a moment of brisk confidence tell Frank how he had fared. The manner in which the communication was made showed Frank that his own secret was no secret from Mordle. If he did not meet confidence by confidence he made no attempt at deception. He looked at Mordle with a curious smile.

"You scarcely expect me to say I am sorry?" he asked.

"No. Want no sympathy. Only want you to be sure that when the time comes to congratulate you I can do so with all my heart."

"Ah!" said Frank, smiling. "Noble—very noble. When the time comes," he added, softly. Thereupon he fell into a train of thought—a train which ran upon a single line and always took him to one particular station.

This, then, is how matters stood at the beginning of October. Mr. Carruthers, having completed his diagnosis, not perhaps to his entire satisfaction, felt that the moment was drawing near when he must make the supreme effort to expel for ever that morbidness which he believed to have intrenched itself in Miss Clauson's system. Still he was bound to confess what many other practitioners ought to confess, that he was working in the dark. He was about to try a kill or cure remedy, the desperate nature of which would, strangely enough, act not upon the patient but upon him who administered it. No wonder, with so little to guide him, he hesitated and postponed.

At this juncture the Talberts gave a dinner-party—a man's dinner-party. The following were the blessed recipients of invitations: Lord Kelston, who was staying for a few days at his place, Sir John Williams, of Almondsthorpe, Colonel White,

the officer commanding the regiment at the neighbouring barracks, Mr. Fallon, the polished Royal Academician who was sojourning at the village inn, and making outdoor sketches of autumnal foliage, and Mr. Fletcher of the Hollows, the largest landowner, save Lord Kelston, in the county. These, with Frank and the hosts, made a party of eight—the number which, according to an axiom of the Talberts, should never be exceeded.

From the above names and descriptions it will be rightly guessed that the party was distinguished, well-selected, and well-balanced. Selection and balance were matters upon which the brothers prided themselves as much if not more than they did upon the refinement of the dinner itself. In this particular party, small as it was, culture, learning, art, arms, landed interest and hereditary sway were properly personified. It was, indeed, a representative gathering after the Talberts' own hearts.

But two days before it took place an event happened which threatened it ill. Lord Kelston wrote Horace one of those pleasant familiar letters which, coming from a lord, are always delightful. He said he should take the liberty of bringing his friend Mr. Simmons with him. As this would raise the number to nine, it necessitated asking another man in order to equalise the sides of the table.

Then came consultation high and earnest. Whom could they ask upon so short a notice worthy of forming one of such a distinguished party? Each of the Talberts would have felt insulted had he been asked by a friend to stop a gap, so following the golden rule they shrank from the task before them. Still, they could not have four on one side of the table and three on the other.

Frank listened to their solemn deliberations for some time, then tried to help them out of the difficulty. "Leave me out," he said. "Beatrice and I"—he spoke of her sometimes now as Beatrice—"will dine together in the nursery or the housekeeper's room. Whittaker can bring the dishes straight from your table. It will be delightful."

"My dear Frank!" This joint exclamation showed the utter futility of his suggestion.

"Why not ask the rector? I thought it was the duty of a country clergyman to meet emergencies like this."

"He talks about nothing but his fishing," said Horace, mournfully.

"Fishing for what? For men?"

"No; salmon and trout," answered Horace, as usual taking the matter prosaically.

"Why not Mordle? He is capital company."

"Ha-hum," said Horace, glancing at Herbert. "This is scarcely a curate's party."

"No, scarcely," said Herbert, shaking his head.

At last they decided to ask a Mr. Turner, but the decision was arrived at with misgivings; for Mr. Turner was in trade. He was, however, a merchant prince—even a merchant-emperor, and, as Horace expressed it, was a member of the aristocracy of wealth. They felt that Mr. Turner might be asked at short notice, and would not be offended when he heard it was to meet Lord Kelston. This is one of the many advantages of entertaining lords.

Nevertheless, they were conscience-stricken at having asked any one to stop a gap, so made amends by arranging their guests so that Mr. Turner should sit on Herbert's left hand; Horace's supporters being Lord Kelston and his friend Mr. Simmons. The latter was a man of middle age, with dark eyes and exquisitely chiselled aquiline features, and wearing an air of refinement which at once commended him to Horace.

The dinner began propitiously, and progressed faultlessly. The table, over the decoration of which the brothers had spent much time and more thought, was a perfect picture. When their guests were only men, the Talberts were extra particular. The lack of the refining element, the presence of woman, had to be compensated by an ultra fastidiousness of detail. Even Frank, who had been behind the

scenes, marvelled at the effect of his hosts' hospitable and artistic exertions. But, all the same, he pitied them as we should all pity a host who is certain to be rendered wretched by a tureen of burnt soup or a bottle of corked wine.

Horace talked gravely and pleasantly to the right and to the left. Herbert was compelled to attend almost entirely to Mr. Turner, who had a booming voice, which he insisted upon making heard. Frank, who was next to the artist, found the dinner not so dull as he had feared it would be.

In the course of conversation Horace learnt that Lord Kelston's friend was Mr. Simmons, the noted barrister, who had so suddenly sprung into eminence. Mr. Simmons was a Jew of gentle birth and education, and Horace was very fond of high-class Jews. So the two men got on admirably. Frank also knew who Mr. Simmons was. Herbert did not.

All went on as well as the Talberts could have wished until the claret was placed on the table. Then an awful thing occurred—a *contretemps*, which to this day is a sore subject with Horace and Herbert. It all arose from inviting the stop-gap. Listen.

Mr. Turner, as leaders of commerce are very properly in the habit of doing, began talking about England's commercial condition. He spoke in his

biggest voice. As he was treating upon a subject on which he was an authority, he felt he had a right to use it. Herbert listened with his gentle, polite smile, but felt sorry Mr. Turner had been invited.

"What is ruining England?" boomed out Mr. Turner. "I'll tell you, my dear sir. The Jews are ruining England."

As Mr. Turner must know best, Herbert simply bowed in acquiescence.

Horace in the mean time was saying to Mr. Simmons, "It is an indisputable fact that the Jews are the most loyal, patriotic race under the sun. Their cleverness no one denies. In the finer, the emotional arts, such as music and poetry, it is generally admitted that a man must have a strain of Jewish blood in him to rise to eminence."

Here Mr. Simmons bowed and smiled.

"Read one of the trade gazettes," continued Turner, fiercely.

"I should not be able to understand it," urged Herbert.

"Read the list of bills of sale," shouted Turner. "See the Levis, the Abrahams, the Moseses, who are battening on borrowers. The Jews are the curse of the country. They are sucking on its blood and marrow."

And Horace, who, although he shuddered at Mr. Turner's strident tones, avoided listening to his words, was saying to his neighbour—

"In the law and in statesmanship we have living proofs. And as to that branch of which I understand nothing, commerce, we have but to mark the decay of Spain after the persecution and expulsion of your gifted nation."

But Mr. Simmons did not hear this compliment. He was listening to loud-voiced Turner.

"Look at Austria! Ruined, sir, ruined by them! All the land in their hands. I wish the time would come again when the Austrian students at Pesth——"

"Pesth is in Hungary," said Herbert, softly.

"Hungarian students, then. The time should be again when they used to go of a morning and rake over the ashes of burnt Jews to find the gold pieces they had swallowed."

Everybody heard this coarse and brutal wish. Mr. Simmons's face flushed. He half rose from his chair, and glanced at Horace. That glance was enough to make him resume his seat.

The look of horror, absolute horror at a guest's having been insulted at his table, which Horace's face wore, was more than wonderful—it was sublime. Never had such a thing occurred before. Such an-

other shock would be all but a death-blow. His knees trembled; his face grew white to the very lips. He met Simmons's glance with an entreating, appealing, apologetic look, that spoke volumes of abasement and mortification.

Mr. Simmons, with the quickness of his race, read what was passing in Horace's mind. His anger merged into pity for his courteous, kindly host. He reseated himself, and said with a pleasant smile, "How curious such things sound to men of the world like us." Then he said something in praise of the Lafitte. Horace gave a sigh of relief, and to his dying day will love that gentle Jew.

But Herbert had seen his brother's face, and knew that a catastrophe had happened. He guessed that Mr. Turner's Jew-baiting proclivities had brought it about. So he adroitly turned the conversation, and by an admirable exercise of self-abnegation set Turner booming away about the iniquities of the mayor, aldermen, and town council of Blacktown. It was an heroic act, and no one but Herbert knew what it cost him.

Taking it altogether, the Talberts do not count that dinner among their social successes.

Frank Carruthers had by now grown rather tired of Fallon on the principles of true art. He, seated midway between the hosts, had fully ap-

preciated the Simmons-Turner episode, and was longing to give vent to the laughter which politeness compelled him to stifle. Moreover, he was thinking a great deal about Miss Clauson, and how lonely she must be feeling. A young man always flatters himself that the young woman he loves is lonely without him.

Frank knew that when the party adjourned to the drawing-room he should see Beatrice. Her uncles wished her to be there; and it was not the rule of Hazlewood House for the men guests to go straight from the table to the smoking-room. So whilst Horace and Herbert were seeing that the curiously shaped Venetian flasks were going round with hospitable, but not with coarsely convivial speed, Mr. Carruthers was summoning up courage to desert his post and cheer Miss Clauson's loneliness. The thought of that loneliness grew so painful that, taking advantage of Horace's being engaged in deep conversation with Lord Kelston, he rose, slipped from the room, and passing across the hall opened the drawing-room door.

The drawing-room door, like every other door in Hazlewood House, did its duty without noise. There are some people's doors which always scrape and bang, just as there are some people's shoes which always creak. The Talberts' shoes never

creaked. The Talberts' doors never uttered a sound. So Frank stood on the thick soft carpet and looked at Miss Clauson, who had no idea that her solitary exile was ended.

She was seated on the music bench. Her hands were on the keys of the piano, but making no music. She was gazing with grave eyes far far away —looking right through the centre of the satin-wood Sheraton cabinet which, full of choice porcelain, stood against the opposite wall. Her thoughts, sad or sweet, were in dreamland.

And Mr. Carruthers stood watching her. He knew he was doing wrong—knew he ought to make her aware of his presence—but the picture was to him so divinely beautiful that he could not help himself.

The girl was perfectly dressed; if fault could be found with her attire it was that it was a trifle too old for her age. Her arms and neck gleamed white and fair from the black satin of the dress, which fitted as a dress can only fit a form like hers. The rich brown hair was cunningly and becomingly coiled, and without jewel or even flower to detract from its own native glory. No wonder that Carruthers was content to watch her in admiring silence!

And as he watched he saw, or fancied he saw, tears rising to those grey eyes. This was more than human nature could bear.

Mr. Carruthers to this day assures himself that he entered that drawing-room with no intention of precipitating matters. We may believe him, because, as it was probable that in a few minutes nine respectable middle-aged gentlemen would troop in, the occasion was not a propitious one. So it is clear that he acted on the impulse of the moment.

He never knew how he dared to do it, but before she looked round he was at her side, his arm was round her—a music bench offers dangerous facilities, it has no back—and he was telling her with passionate eloquence that he loved her—he loved her! There was none of poor Mr. Mordle's hopelessness about this ardent young Carruthers.

But how did Beatrice take it? With a low cry as of fear, perhaps aversion, she sprang to her feet and stood for a moment looking at him with a face as pale as death. Then without a word she turned and went swiftly towards the door. Frank with a face as pale as her own followed and intercepted her. He grasped her hand.

"Beatrice, have you nothing to say to me? Nothing?"

She breathed quickly. She seemed to set her teeth. She answered not a word.

"Beatrice, have you nothing to tell me? Cannot you tell me you love me? Answer me."

There was no trace of raillery or lightness in Mr. Carruthers's manner. It was that of a man playing for a life or death stake. "Answer me. Say you love me," he repeated.

"I cannot," said Beatrice hoarsely. "Let me go."

Without a word he dropped her hand. He even held the door open and closed it when she had passed. Then with a stern look on his face he stood in the middle of the room, gazing at the blank door and wondering if he was dreaming—if he had really, since he entered that room, played his great stake and lost it.

Could Frank Carruthers have followed Beatrice to her room, he would have seen her throw herself on her bed and burst into a paroxysm of grief. He would have seen the sombre Mrs. Miller come to her, embrace her, soothe her, and entreat her. He would have seen a look of stern resolution settle on the servant's strongly-marked features, a look which contrasted strangely with the affectionate solicitude which she displayed towards her mistress in her trouble.

But Carruthers could not see these things, and had he seen them would have been no wiser for the sight.

CHAPTER XIV.

"HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL."

AFTER Beatrice had left the drawing-room Frank stood motionless for a couple of minutes. He could not at once realise his position. In a dim indistinct way he saw what a mighty change his failure must make in his life, but he absolutely shrank from calling up a finished picture of what he fancied his future life must be, uncoloured by the love which he had by now learned to look upon as indispensable to making the picture a pleasing one.

He could not understand it. He could not believe it. Frank Carruthers, although perfectly able to value himself fairly, was no coxcomb, ready to fancy every little act of kindness or polite attention on the part of a woman an evidence of a consuming passion for himself. Although for weeks he had been making veiled love to Beatrice, there was no one action of hers to which he could point and say "that gave me hope and led me on." He had not felt her hand linger in his own. He had not seen a sudden blush dye her cheek as he drew near. He had not caught those earnest grey eyes fixed upon him with a meaning which lovers readily guess. It

was perhaps the very absence of anything approaching coquetry and encouragement which to Frank had made the girl so well worth the winning.

Nevertheless, there was something—he could not, dared not particularise—something in her manner, more especially during the last few days, which had, well, to say the least, been of great comfort to him. He fancied, it may have been but fancy, there was a change in the way in which she spoke to him—perhaps in the way in which she looked at him. Yes, there must have been something, for, although he did not put the thought into words, Carruthers knew, that had Beatrice been the same to him as in the early days of their acquaintance, no love of his, however dominant, could have forced him to put the question he had just put with such a sorry, and, it may be, unforeseen result. The man's half-cynical exterior hid a proud and sensitive nature. Had hope been entirely absent he would not have bared his heart to the woman he loved best in the world.

Even in the first bitterness of defeat he did not blame her. That all was ended and over he never doubted. His feelings were those of bewilderment. He could not understand it; could see no reason for this summary and without-appeal rejection of his love.

"I must go and think it all over," he muttered.

"I cant't think here, in this room where the perfume of her dress still lingers."

He stooped and picked up a flower which must have fallen from her dress. He took a glove which was lying on the piano.

"What a leveller love is," he said grimly; "one laughs at the idiotic proceedings of others, and when one's own time comes does just the same. A glove! A flower! Conventional emblems, lacking even originality. What a fool I am!"

Nevertheless he kept them both, and no doubt derived as much comfort from them as the possession of such things is supposed to give.

After this he took his hat, and, forgetting all about the dinner-party, went out into the garden to think. In spite of his assumed calm he must have been strongly moved, for he commenced his operation of thinking by digging his heel into the immaculate gravel path so viciously that the large roller was needed for half an hour the next morning in order to smooth matters down. Then, ashamed of this burst of passion, he walked down to the bottom of the garden, and regardless of October dews and chilly air, threw himself on a seat and strove to account for what had happened, and to determine its result so far as his own future was concerned.

But think as he would, and we may presume his brain was a clever and able one, Mr. Carruthers could only get to three conclusions, unsatisfactory when taken singly, and, of course, trebly so in the aggregate. Firstly, he was more in love with Beatrice than ever. Secondly, he could not understand why she had refused him. Thirdly, having once asked a woman to be his wife nothing would induce him to repeat the question.

"No, I won't grovel," said Frank. "Most fellows seem to grovel when they are in love. Hang it, I won't! I'll be original in that respect if I have to cut my heart out."

These remarks were of course applicable to conclusion number three—a conclusion at which love always laughs. Given a prouder man than Mr. Carruthers, and as hopelessly in love with a woman, that woman, if she wished, might have a fresh declaration of undying passion every week in the year. Oh, yes—all lovers can "grovel" if needs be.

By and by a curious whim seized this particular lover. He would go down and see Sylvanus Mordle. Not that he wished to unbosom his woes to the curate—that would be grovelling with a vengeance—but there seemed a certain grim propriety in seeking and sitting with the other man who was rowing in the same boat, or, to put it

poetically, the man whose barque of joy had been wrecked upon the same rock as his own. Besides, Mordle would be sure to talk about Miss Clauson —he always did. "What a fool I am!" said Frank more bitterly than ever. Nevertheless, he walked down to the curate's lodgings.

Mr. Mordle lodged in one of a row of new houses which a sanguine builder had erected on a plot of ground not far from the church. When these houses were first built the villagers expressed their wonder as to who would inhabit them. They were red brick houses with freestone dressings—the kind of houses classified as "genteel" residences. As such, they were a cut above the villagers, and many cuts — quite a gash, in fact — below the "families of position." As half of the houses are empty to this day the builder has ceased to wonder at the villagers' wonder.

When Frank was shown into his room Mordle jumped up and greeted him cheerfully. "Hallo!" he jerked out. "You here? Why, what's up?"

"I only came for a smoke and a chat."

"Thought you had every one—all the swells—up at the house to-night."

Frank started. "I quite forgot them," he said with lack of caution unusual to him.

"Forgot them! How shocked Horace will be—how grieved Herbert! No matter. Here you are."

Whilst speaking, the curate bustled about. He opened a drawer, took out a box of cigars, then shut the drawer with a bang. He opened a cupboard, took out a bottle of whiskey, then slammed the cupboard door. He slapped the cigars, the whiskey, a water bottle, and a glass on the table in front of Frank, and waited for him to help himself.

But Mr. Carruthers sat silent and motionless. He was looking at Mordle, who was still bronzed by the sun, and seemed to be in an aggressively rude state of health. He wondered if the curate felt as wretched when Beatrice refused him as he, Frank Carruthers, did at that moment. If so, and if Sylvanus had really conquered his disappointment, he was more of a man than his visitor, and as such entitled to respect. He got so deep into these speculations that he did not notice the curate's curious glances.

"Look here, Carruthers," said Mordle briskly. "You forget a dinner-party. You come to chat and smoke with me. You don't smoke—you don't chat. What's up?"

"Nothing." Frank roused himself and took a cigar.

"Nothing!" said the curate. "That means everything."

"Well then, everything."

"And everything, as I take it, means—tell me what it means, Carruthers. May I wish you joy?"

There was a lump in Sylvanus's throat, but he choked it down manfully. Frank wondered at the curate's quickness in guessing. Men in love always wonder at the preternatural gift of detection with which their friends seem endowed.

"May I wish you joy?" reiterated Mordle.

"You may wish what you like; but the truth is we are partners in misfortune."

"You have tried?"

"And failed." Frank rapped the words out sharply. Mordle looked the picture of surprise. He held his hand out to his visitor.

"Hang it!" said Frank. "I don't want pity. If you bore it, I suppose I can."

"Our cases are different. You felt certain of success."

"Did I? If so, it was only one of the delusions natural to a man of my age."

"Explain."

"The older you grow the more liable you are to delusions. A man between thirty and forty more easily deludes himself into believing that a woman loves him than a boy of twenty does."

"Ha!" said Mordle. "All new to me, this. Let

me think it over." The curate loved an argument of this sort. Presently he looked up.

"That's all—rot!" he said. "Boy of twenty—modest and good—can't see any reason for a woman's loving him. Man of thirty or forty—successful in life, say—measured his strength against his fellows'—can't help feeling he's quite worth being loved. See how fallacious your argument."

"Never mind," said Frank; "it doesn't matter which way you take it."

"I say," continued Mordle, laying his hand on Frank's shoulder. "Listen to my advice. Don't you take 'No' for an answer."

"I'll ask no woman twice to be my wife," said Frank, with conclusion number three fresh in his mind.

"You might ask this one twenty times and feel happy if you got her then. But twenty times won't be needed. She loves you now, Carruthers."

"What folly you talk!"

"I don't—I never talk folly. I have seen you together. I have watched her as closely as I watch one of my flock who leans towards dissent. I have seen what you haven't seen, and again I say, don't take 'No' for an answer."

"Let us talk of something else," said Frank. All the same the old proverb about the looker on and

the game came to his mind. Under some circumstances there is much solace to be got out of proverbs.

They talked of something else, but as it always does when a man is in love, that something else veered round ever to the one thing. At last Frank threw the end of his cigar away and bade the curate good night. Mordle's emphatic cheery assertion that he ought not to despair had done him good, although he still swore he would not "grovel" and ask again.

His guest having left him Sylvanus drew himself up and patted his chest approvingly. "It was magnanimous, very magnanimous," he said, "to help a rival like that. But I am thoroughly cured, so could afford to do it."

He always told himself he was cured. Perhaps he was. All the same the Rev. Sylvanus Mordle is a bachelor to this day.

Frank went back to Hazlewood House, and apologised for his strange absence as best he could. He had been seized with a splitting headache and compelled to seek fresh air. Strange to say a splitting headache had also driven Miss Clauson, not into the fresh air, but to her room. "Thunder in the air, no doubt," said Herbert, the most unsuspicious of men.

About half past eleven the last of the guests departed. Mr. Turner, believing Lord Kelston's friend to be an aristocratic Christian of the most orthodox type, bade him an effusive good night, little dreaming of the insults he had been heaping upon his head. Horace and Herbert gave a sigh of relief as their Jew-hating guest left the house. They had too much sense to think of apologising for the mishap—they merely doubled their civility to the eminent Israelite. At last every one had said good-bye, and the shutting up began.

Frank in a moody sullen way watched Horace and Herbert as they went from window to window trying shutters and bars and bolts. He did not smile even when Horace gravely and deliberately counted the forks and spoons in Whittaker's basket —the extra plate given out for dinner-parties— whilst Herbert blended together two half-emptied bottles of sherry and made one full one. The domestic duties were at last finished; the bottles locked up; the spoons and forks snugly tucked up in little chamois-leather bags, ready to be put to rest in the safe until again wanted. Horace and Herbert looked at Frank.

"Shall we go to bed now, or would you like to stay up longer?"

Frank started out of his reverie. He did not

feel in the least inclined for bed. "If you don't mind," he said, "I will go into the library and write some letters. The fresh air has made me so wide-awake that I sha'n't be able to sleep for a long time."

They did mind, of course; but were too polite to say so. Whittaker was ordered to take the lamp into the library, and Frank bade his cousins good night.

"Please turn the wick down low before you blow it out," said Horace.

"And," entreated Herbert, "would you mind turning the hearthrug upside down when you leave the room? It makes it last so much longer."

Frank promised, wondering the while why the constitution of a hearthrug was such that the night and early morning air impaired it. Then he sought the library, closed the door, and was alone with his own thoughts.

There is no occasion to recapitulate these. We have had them all before, and they grew no more cheerful. Even Mr. Carruthers got tired of them at last, and to break the monotony made a pretence of writing a letter to a friend. But the sight of pen and paper woke a strong temptation to say again by their aid all he had already said to Beatrice, as well as all he meant to say when cut so

suddenly short. But his pride would not allow him to break so quickly his resolution number three.

Then he tried to read. Naturally he turned to poetry. All lovers turn to it as inevitably as a duck does to water. He took Tennyson from the shelf, and for the first time in his life sympathised with the ill-used egotistical hero of *Locksley Hall*. After this he chanced upon a volume of Mrs. Browning's, and read all about the poet who, although so passionately in love with Lady Geraldine, was thick-headed enough not to be able to detect the existence of a corresponding sentiment on the part of her ladyship.

And just as Mr. Carruthers reached the part where the lovely lady comes by night, passes through the poet's window, and in rather a forward way does all the wooing, he heard a light faint finger-tap on the library door. A wild but not altogether unnatural thought ran through him. Was a second Lady Geraldine episode about to occur? Could it be that Beatrice—

He ran to the door and threw it open. On the threshold stood, not Beatrice, but — terrible disappointment—the black-robed figure of Mrs. Miller, the nurse. What in the world could this sombre uninteresting woman want with him at this hour of the night?

"You—Mrs. Miller!" he exclaimed. "Is anything the matter?"

"May I come in, sir?" she asked.

"Certainly, what can I do for you?"

She entered the room and carefully closed the door. Frank's wonderment grew. He could not help picturing the dismay which would fall upon Horace and Herbert had they known that at one o'clock in the morning he was conversing with a female member of their establishment.

Mrs. Miller drew near to him. "May I speak a few words to you, Mr. Carruthers?" She asked the favour respectfully, but as one who fully expected it would be granted.

"Speak away," said Frank, good-naturedly. "But is there anything wrong in the house?"

"Nothing more than you know of, sir."

Her words bore a meaning which did not escape Carruthers. They told him that Mrs. Miller was quite aware of what had taken place between him and Beatrice. He winced mentally. The thought of his rejection becoming the gossip of the servants' hall was not pleasant.

"Well, let me hear what you have to say." He spoke with more asperity than usual.

The strange visitor laid her hand on his arm. She was a tall woman, he was a man of middle

height, so the faces of the two were all but on a level. Frank, who had never until now taken particular notice of the nurse, was much struck by the wild intense look in those dark eyes which gleamed from the white worn-looking face. He began to wonder if her wits were all right. But she spoke sensibly, although there was passion in her voice.

"Mr. Carruthers," she said, "tell me how much you love Miss Beatrice?"

The sudden question staggered as well as annoyed Frank. He frowned. "I am not in the habit of making confidences to—to strangers." He was going to say "inferiors," but it was a word he hated using.

"Oh, sir; don't misunderstand me. Tell me—" the woman spoke with startling earnestness—"tell me: set my mind at rest. Let me know that you love her with all your heart and soul—that the very ground her foot presses is holy to you—that you could cherish her, care for her, be true to her until death! Tell me this and make me happy. Surely you are not ashamed of loving her?"

Her manner was so impressive that Carruthers for the moment forgot it was but a servant who addressed him. "No," he said, speaking slowly, and with his eyes fixed on the opposite wall.

"No, I am not ashamed of loving her. What concern it is of yours I cannot divine; but I love your mistress as much as a man can love a woman."

Mrs. Miller bent down and kissed his hand. She murmured a few words which he could not catch. Most men, not being kings or princes, object to having their hands kissed. Frank did. "Have you anything more to say?" he asked.

"Only this, sir—you will wait, will you not?"

"Wait! For what?"

"For her—for Miss Beatrice. Oh! Mr. Carruthers, you won't go in a fit of anger, and give yourself away to the first doll-faced woman who smiles on you? You will wait for the woman you love—five, ten, twenty years, it may be?"

She clutched his arm, and her eyes looked at him with that same intense imploring gaze.

"I shall never marry another woman," said Frank.

"No—never. Wait for her. She shall be yours at last."

A thought struck Frank. Did this strange woman come to him of her own accord, or had Beatrice sent her? His heart beat violently. "Are you giving me a message from Miss Clauson?" he asked.

"No, sir. Miss Beatrice is not one to send messages by servants. She doesn't know I have come to you. You won't tell her, Mr. Carruthers? Promise me you won't tell her!"

Her face grew paler than before, as the possibility of Carruthers's telling Beatrice of this nocturnal interview rose before her. She seemed so distressed that Frank hastened to assure her he would not mention the matter. Strange as was this woman's manner, something showed him that she meant him well.

"She would never forgive me if she knew." She whispered these words in an awestruck way, as if such a thing was too fearful to contemplate.

"Tell me why you trouble yourself about my affairs?" asked Frank.

"Why do I trouble! Because she is all in this world and the next to me. Because I would kill myself to save her from a pain of mind or body. Listen, Mr. Carruthers. Years ago—she was then but a girl of seventeen or eighteen—she saved me from starvation, from death, from worse. She fed me, clothed me, called me back to life, and saw that I lived. I say to you, Mr. Carruthers, that if I stood with one foot across the golden threshold of the heavenly gate, even if my eyes had caught a glimpse of God and His angels, my ears heard the

sound of the harps of the blest, if below me I saw the fiery gulf—if I knew that withdrawing my foot would bring her happiness, I would withdraw it, and be doomed for ever."

Her figure seemed to dilate as she uttered this tremendous rhapsody. It certainly sounded like an exaggerated expression when used to illustrate the devotion of one woman to another. But the depth of the love which woman can bear to woman has never yet been rightly plumbed.

Even Frank, who we may presume considered Miss Clauson worthy of out-of-the-way adoration, felt that Mrs. Miller's eccentric and profane description of her sentiments towards her mistress was more exalted than any occasion could warrant. Nevertheless, as she was sounding the praises of the woman he loved, his heart softened towards her.

"This is sheer idolatry," he said, not unkindly.

"Call it what you will, sir. I mean all I say, and more."

"And because you are so fond of her, you wish to see her future in my hands, feeling sure it will be a happy one?"

"Yes, sir. I have watched you day by day, and have seen that you love her. I have asked about you, and heard you spoken of with the tongue of good report. Besides——"

She hesitated. Carruthers hoped she would finish the sentence with some information as to the true state of Beatrice's feelings. Mrs. Miller's assurance that she had good grounds for asking him to wait for an indefinite time would be thrice welcome. Lovers and drowning men ought to be coupled together in the matter of catching at straws.

"Well, besides what?" he said, seeing she still hesitated.

"You are both of the elect," she said in strangely solemn accent. "The seal is on your foreheads."

"What *do* you mean?" asked Frank in bewilderment.

She clasped her thin hands together; her eyes shone with strange brilliancy. "Mean!" she exclaimed, so loudly that Frank glanced at the door to make sure that it was closed. "Mean! Can it be possible that those blessed ones who are predestined to be saints hereafter can walk the earth and know it not? I can see it, can read it on your face—on Miss Beatrice's face. 'Many are called, but few are chosen'—few are chosen. You are of the few."

"Oh!" said Frank. He was beginning to understand that he was dealing with a religious fanatic.

His bewilderment was succeeded by pitying curiosity, tempered by sarcasm.

"If one could believe it, it would be very satisfactory," he continued. "Tell me why you feel so sure about us. Our creed must differ from yours."

"Creed!" she burst out. "You were chosen before there was a creed in the world. The seal is put on the elect as they draw the first breath. It may be that a heathen who has never heard God's name shall sit on the steps of the great throne, while he who has lived on earth the life of a saint shall go into everlasting fire."

"This is predestination with a vengeance," thought Frank. "Why do you feel so sure about Miss Clauson and me?" he asked.

"I can read it in your faces. You are to have happiness in this world and in the next."

Frank's sense of humour made him feel inclined to ask Mrs. Miller about the ultimate fate of the gentle Horace and Herbert, with their kindly hearts and old-womanish ways. He would even have liked to know what was to become of the sedate Whittaker, and William Giles, the coachman. But he checked the questions. He saw that what was amusement to him was death to the pale, excited woman at his side. He did not wish to

enter into a theological argument, and at this time of night play Pelagius to this feminine disciple of Augustine. Indeed, he knew that the arguments of those who hold the doctrine of predestination, and its correlative, reprobation, are logically unanswerable by the best theologian ever turned out of Oxford; and theology was not Mr. Carruthers's pet science. So he contented himself by expressing a polite hope that Mrs. Miller felt also sure of her own salvation.

"I!" she exclaimed, and a shudder as of terror ran through her. "I have prayed day and night—day and night—that an answer may be given me, that a sign may be shown to me. The answer has been given."

"Well, you find it all right, I hope," said Frank, to humour her.

She leaned forward, and again clutched his arm. "I am 'one of the many,'" she said, in a low thrilling whisper. Her face wore a look of utter hopelessness. Frank pitied the poor creature from the bottom of his heart.

"My good woman," he said, "your belief is simply a diabolical one. Get rid of it, and trust that there is some mercy to be shown to those who ask for it. Go and talk to Mr. Mordle or the rector or some one whose business it is to set things

of this kind straight. Now I think we had better say good night."

"Good night, sir. Thank you," she said, with a sudden return to her usual calm and respectful manner. Then, with bent head, and hopelessness written all over her, she walked slowly to the door. A thought struck Carruthers.

"Wait a moment," he said; "I should like to write a line to Miss Clauson."

"Love-letters will do no good, sir."

"It's not a love-letter," said Frank somewhat sharply. Mrs. Miller waited.

He took a sheet of paper. After what had happened he felt he could not address the woman he loved as "My dear Miss Clauson," and he did not dare to write "My dear Beatrice." So his letter began abruptly, without address of any kind. Moreover, it was very short. Here it is:—

"Now that I have asked my question, and you have given your answer, tell me would you rather I left this place at once, or stayed on as I intended. —Yours, F. C."

He handed the letter to Mrs. Miller. She took it in a reluctant manner. "You have not written anything unkind to her?" she asked.

"Nothing. Take my word for it."

"And you promise you will wait?"

"I must wait, whether I like it or not," said Frank, rather bitterly.

"Good night, sir." Mrs. Miller curtseyed, and stole noiselessly from the room.

Frank fell back into a reverie. How strange that in the few hours since he had been rejected two persons had bade him wait and hope—Mordle, in his cheery, optimistic way, Mrs. Miller, in her sombre, half-entranced, highly-wrought religious frenzy. Poor woman! what extraordinary ideas she held! She must be next door to a religious monomaniac, with her ghastly tenets of foreordainment and predestination.

Nevertheless, if either of his counsellors gave him hope, it was this mad, wild-spoken fanatic. She was, so to say, Beatrice's body servant, and as such might be presumed to know something of the secrets of her mistress's heart, or at the least to be able to make a shrewd guess at them. So, in spite of his own common sense, in spite of her dismal jargon about the elect, the seals, and the rest of it, the hope which springs eternal began to throw up a tiny shoot in Mr. Carruthers's heart.

At last he went to bed, wondering what answer he would receive to his letter. It is to be hoped the promise he made Mrs. Miller was to be more sacred than those made to Horace and Herbert, for

he blew out the lamp anyhow, and left the hearth-rug to take care of itself.

Alas for the "hope eternal!" It was all but crushed in the morning by a note from Beatrice, which, with the bathos attending all modern emotional incidents, was brought in with his shaving water. It ran so:—"Please go away.—B. C." Then she added in a postscript—"Don't think me unkind. It is better for your sake."

He crushed the paper in his hand, and no doubt cursed, not Beatrice, but his ill-luck. He could not go away that day. He felt that such a sudden departure would set the brothers gossiping and trying to account for its cause. But, as persons generally do in such extremities, he received a letter or a telegram, the nature of which made it imperative he should leave on the morrow.

Horace and Herbert expressed genuine sorrow at this sudden termination to his visit. They pressed him to come to Hazlewood House at the end of the next term. He promised to do so. Only by foreswearing himself could he avoid giving an explanation of what made his presence for the future impossible. Of course he saw Beatrice as usual; but neither by word nor look did he allude to what had passed between them. On her part she seemed shy and constrained, and the old apathetic manner

appeared to have reasserted its sway. Dr. Carruthers's cure for morbidness was a failure!

The moment for departure came. Horace had taken the reins. Herbert was beside him. Frank's portmanteaus were stowed away in the big wagonette. He turned to shake hands with Beatrice. "I came here an invalid in body," he said to himself; "I go away with a chronic mental disease. The exchange is a sorry one."

"Won't you come with us, Beatrice?" asked Herbert.

She drew back her outstretched hand, and hesitated. Frank turned his eyes away. He would in no way plead for this concession. Suddenly, and in a defiant way, which such a trivial matter by no means seemed to call for, she exclaimed, "Yes, I will come. Wait for me one minute." In one minute, literally, she was back again, in her hat and jacket, and seated opposite Frank.

Few words passed between them during the drive to the station. A mere good-bye was all they said as Frank took his seat in the train; but as that train rolled out of Blacktown, as his eyes for the last time met Beatrice's fairly and fully, Mr. Carruthers's heart leaped in a way which would have been a credit to a boy's of eighteen, and once more and for ever he knew that no vanity of his had led

him to dare to think that in Miss Clauson's manner towards him there was an undefinable, inscrutable "something," which had led him to risk and apparently lose all.

So "hope eternal" sprang again, and the conviction forced itself on Mr. Carruthers that the day might come when, in spite of his conclusion number three, he must perforce "grovel."

And, notwithstanding his pride, this fact was by no means an unpleasant one!

CHAPTER XV.

A DISPUTED CLAIM.

DURING the last three months of the year Hazlewood House did not belie its reputation for calm regularity of its domestic concerns and immunity from the many petty ills and annoyances which afflict less methodically-conducted establishments. So far as could be seen, all promised well for a quiet, placid, and uneventful winter. Horace and Herbert employed themselves as was their wont. They were men who could spread out a little occupation over a large slice of time, so never found the hours hang wearily. Beatrice seemed fairly happy with her bright-haired boy. The little fellow was now be-

ginning to prattle merrily, and his manner towards the Talberts was more audacious and familiar than ever. Altogether it looked as if nothing would occur to disturb the even tenour of life at Hazlewood House, until the budding hedges once more brought round the usual spring cleaning.

But, all undreamt-of by the brothers, storms were brewing which were to shake their house to the foundations.

Christmas came. Now Christmas Day was a day on which the Talberts made great sacrifices for the good of their fellow-creatures. Sylvanus Mordle, who believed that those in poverty were as much entitled to creature-comforts as to spiritual consolations, always sent the hat round at Christmas, and collected a special fund for the purpose of giving all his very poor people a hearty dinner. At this dinner the Talberts were his henchmen. No one who knew their fastidious tastes could have seen them carving huge joints of sanguinary-looking beef or serving out sticky segments of plum-pudding without feeling sure that, at heart, they were thoroughly good fellows. Herbert did once plaintively ask Mordle if the meat need be *quite* so red. The curate chuckled. "If it wasn't red, they'd say 'twas American, and leave it," he answered. It is to be feared that experience had taught Mordle that

charity is often looked upon as a right to be demanded, not a bounty for which to be thankful.

It was no doubt the terrible sights of the forenoon which made the Talberts rigidly taboo, so far as their own table was concerned, all conventional Christmas fare. As Horace gravely said, there is, to educated minds, something savouring of vulgarity in supposing that the celebration of a certain holiday must be attended by the consumption of a certain class of comestibles. So their dinner consisted of clear soup, fish, a brace of birds, and an omelet.

"We never thought of Beatrice," said Herbert penitently. "Beatrice might have liked roast-beef and plum-pudding."

But Miss Clauson did not yearn for Christmas diet. Moreover, her thoughts were far away from eating and drinking. Indeed, during the last three months the girl had been, even for her, strangely quiet and thoughtful. As for a little while longer we must be contented to regard her from the outside only, her musings cannot be divulged. To-day, no doubt, she was thinking a great deal about an impending visit to her father's house.

Horace and Herbert had urged it earnestly. Not, as they kindly and truthfully told her, that they wished to lose her for even a day. But it was well

that the world should think that the Clausons were a united family. It is curious what a simpleton most people think the world, and how easily they fancy it can be taken in.

Beatrice consented to be guided by her uncles' advice. So on the day after Christmas she left Oakbury. Sir Maingay and his family were wintering in London. It is surprising the number of respectable families who do winter in London.

Sir Maingay met her at Paddington. The baronet looked a little rounder and a little more commonplace than when last she saw him. He greeted his daughter affectionately, but told her she looked ill and careworn. Then he inquired for Horace and Herbert. As from the very first day they had kept Sir Maingay in his proper place, he looked upon them with the greatest respect. "Is it true they have adopted a child?" he asked. Some garbled version of the affair had reached him.

"No," said Beatrice. "I have."

"You, my dear! Adopt a child! Why, it is time you thought of the possibility of having children of your own. I have for months been hoping to hear you were engaged to be married."

"I shall never marry," said Beatrice, rather coldly.

"Depend upon it, it is the best state," said Sir Maingay eagerly. Then he started off on the sub-

ject of the precocity which Beatrice's little half-brothers displayed. How the elder said this yesterday and the younger did that the day before—a record of individual but not general interest.

But just before they reached his house, Sir Maingay made a more notable remark. "I made the acquaintance this week of a young relative of your poor mother's—a Mr. Carruthers, who was staying with you some time ago. I told him you were coming up, and he promised to call."

It was growing dusk, so the flush that leapt to Miss Clauson's cheek was unseen. She was silent for half a minute, then she said quietly, "I shall be very glad to see Mr. Carruthers."

Lady Clauson was gracious and condescending. She had gained some sort of success in town last season, so could afford to be so. Nevertheless, Beatrice was in various ways shown that she was a stranger within her father's gates. The little boys were brought down to see her dressed in their company clothes and manners. They were good, ordinary, uninteresting little fellows, and no doubt Miss Clauson contrasted them with a golden-haired pet of hers at Oakbury. Although the ladies were civil to each other they did not sympathise. Like many others, Lady Clauson was utterly unable to understand Beatrice.

"Never, if you can help it, marry a widower," she said to a bosom friend. "No one can tell the anxiety a first wife's child is—no one who has not experienced it."

"It must be," said the friend with great feeling.

"If she did not always dress so carefully," continued Lady Clauson sorrowfully, "I should believe she had made up her mind to be an old maid, and might then do something for the boys. She has more money than any young girl should have."

Carruthers called; Carruthers dined at Sir Maingay's, and moreover, presuming on his distant relationship, Carruthers had the audacity and, after all that had happened, we may say humility, to escort Miss Clauson to an afternoon classical concert. Since last October Frank had a thousand times pictured his meeting with Beatrice and a thousand times settled how he would deport himself. The result was that he forgot all his self-training and bore himself simply as nature prompted him. He was earnest, tender, respectful. More than ever he felt the charm which the girl exercised over him, yet he dared not speak again of love. In his inner heart he knew that for well or ill he must some day re-say those passionate words—but not yet. The second cast of the die must, should be, the last. His nearest verbal approach to love-making was this:—

He told Beatrice he had received a letter from Horace begging him to spend a few days at Oakbury before the Lent term began. "It is a great compliment," he said.

"Yes," answered Beatrice, "very great. Are you going?"

"That is for you to decide, not for me."

She dropped her eyes and was silent. Frank waited.

"Do you forbid it?" he asked in that authoritative voice which women love to hear with a man. Still she was silent. He repeated the question.

"I have no right to forbid it," she said.

"You have every right. We do not allude to the past, but we do not forget it. Look up and answer me. Shall I go to Hazlewood?"

Strange to say, he spoke in a commanding way, such as he had never before displayed when addressing her. Perhaps she liked him none the less for it. With an effort she raised her eyes to his. "It is most unwise," she whispered.

"Unwise you mean for me, of course," he said quickly. "That part is for me to decide, not for you."

She held out her hand impulsively. "We can be friends, Frank," she said.

"Always," answered Carruthers. "And now we may as well settle to go down together."

To this she made no objection, and Frank's love-making ended for the time. His dreams that night may have been pleasant ones; but as for Beatrice, she sat for hours in her room gazing into the fire with a pained, hopeless look on her face. The little line which Frank had once noticed between her brows seemed to have grown deeper and more distinct.

If Carruthers had hoped for a great deal from that journey to Blacktown, he was doomed to be disappointed. Events occurred at Hazlewood House which took Beatrice back in hot haste and alone.

One morning Horace and Herbert were in earnest discussion respecting a hip-bath, the paint of which showed signs of wear. The question was whether it should be sent to the auctioneer's and sold for the best price, or should be re-japanned. Herbert, who was given to temporising, favoured the reparation; Horace, who was more thorough in his ideas, thought it should go at once to the sale-room. The matter was so important and interesting that neither of the brothers heard the sound of carriage wheels outside the house.

The wheels were those belonging to a gig, a genuine unmistakable gig. Whittaker, who saw it come up the drive and stop at the front, not the side door, was much disgusted. He did not know

the traditional respectability enjoyed by the driver of a gig. He drew the line at dog-carts. Sylvanus's tricycle was only borne with because it carried a clergyman.

The gig in question was driven by a man who dismounted and helped to the ground a woman with a good-tempered-looking shiny face, and who was dressed in refreshingly bright colours. One of them rang the bell timidly, and after a befitting interval the dignified Whittaker condescended to open the door. The man asked if the Messrs. Talbert were in. This collective style jarred upon Whittaker, who had been in the family long enough to remember the time when "Messrs. Talbert and Co." was a well-known form of address. He replied that Mr. Talbert and Mr. Herbert were in, but at present engaged.

"We will wait until they can see us," said the man. So Whittaker let them come into the house. They wiped their feet on entering so carefully and thoroughly that all doubts as to their being persons of any importance were at once set at rest. Whittaker felt he was quite right in offering them chairs in the hall. They were too respectable to be left standing, but the gig and the feet-rubbing combined showed they were not to be ushered into the drawing-room.

"What name shall I say?" he asked.

"We are strangers," said the man. "You can say we have called on private and confidential business."

"You had better give me your name," said Whittaker.

"Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings," answered the woman.

So Whittaker went up-stairs, found his masters, and told them that a Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings wanted to see them on private and confidential business.

"Rawlings," said Herbert with a shudder. "We know no one with such an awful name. Who are they, Whittaker?"

"I have no idea, sir," said Whittaker. As his masters adjudged the name horrible, he felt half offended at it being supposed he knew any one named Rawlings.

"Where are they?" asked Horace.

"In the hall, sir." Whittaker felt thankful he had not not been tempted to give them sitting-room honours.

"Whittaker," said Horace, gravely, "we shall be extremely annoyed if you have let persons come inside our house who are book-hawkers, or, worse still, those who try to buy up second-hand clothes, as these people say they come on private and confidential business."

However, they put their eye-glasses up, and went down to the hall and confronted their visitors. They found a woman whose philistinic attire set their teeth on edge, and a pale-faced man with rather prominent light blue eyes, and a weak-looking agitated kind of face. The brothers wondered mightily what these people could want with them.

"You wish to speak to us?" said Horace, suavely. Although they kept persons at a distance as long as possible at arm's-length, the Talberts were always polite and kindly spoken.

"If you please, sir," said the man. Horace and Herbert waited.

"We should like to see you in private," said the woman, glancing round the hall. So Herbert opened the drawing-room door, and they all walked inside. "Now, then," said Horace, encouragingly, "what can we do for you, Mr. Rawlings—I believe that is your name?"

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Rawlings, drawing out a pocket-book, and handing Horace a card, on which was printed, "Rawlings, Bros, Purveyors of Pork, 142, Gray Street, London." Horace shivered. He felt very angry.

"Pork," he said, "is a meat we never touch." Then he motioned to Herbert to ring the bell. But Mr. Rawlings interposed. "I didn't come on that

sort of business, sir. The fact is, I have heard that some time last year a child, a little boy, was left at your house, sent from no one knows where. Is this correct, gentlemen?"

"It is quite true," answered Horace. He was sorry he had misjudged the man in thinking him a touting tradesman. "But why do you ask?" he added.

The man grew visibly excited. "Me and my wife," he said, "have strong hopes that the little boy is one we lost, or had stolen from us more than two years ago."

The brothers' faces were perfect studies. That two people like this should lay claim to Beatrice's boy was simply absurd. "Impossible!" they ejaculated in one breath.

"Don't say impossible," said Mr. Rawlings. "We may find our little boy at last; we have been hunting about all over England for foundlings such as this. It may be this one is ours."

"Why should it have been sent here?"

"I can't tell, sir. But I won't leave a stone unturned. May we see the boy?"

The situation was growing ridiculous, and if the Talberts disliked one thing more than another it was a ridiculous situation. The best way out of this one seemed to be that Mr. Rawlings should see the

child and be satisfied it was not his missing offspring. So Horace rang the bell and desired that the little boy should be brought down.

Mrs. Miller, the nurse, upon receiving instructions to this effect, imagined that her charge was to be shown to visitors of importance. So she quickly put on his best garments, and made him look very cherubic. He trotted into the drawing-room a cabinet picture of childish health and beauty.

Rawlings looked at him with excitement in every line of his face. His light blue eyes seemed to be starting out of his head. "Maria," he whispered hoarsely to his wife, "look at him. Just what ours would have grown to. The same hair—the same eyes. Maria, is this not your boy? Answer me—and thank heaven we have at last found him."

The wife looked at the child, but did not answer at once.

"It is—I know it is," said the man. "Tell them so, Maria."

"I hope it is," said his wife.

The Talberts on hearing this looked stupefied. The case was assuming undreamt-of proportions. Dimly they saw that this recognition meant strange things.

"My good man," said Horace, "you are making a complete mistake."

"Oh no, sir—no mistake. How can a father be mistaken? Oh, my pretty boy—my long-lost lamb! Come to me and give me one kiss! Come to your father!"

He shot his arms out so vehemently that Harry was frightened, and instead of accepting the invitation ran to Herbert, and hiding his face against his leg, set up a howl which brought in Mrs. Miller, who at once whipped him away. She had strict instructions from Beatrice never to let the child become a nuisance. Horace and Herbert with arched eyebrows sat staring at their visitors.

"We may take our little boy back with us at once, sir—may we not?" asked Rawlings.

"Certainly not," said Horace. "You have not given us the slightest proof it is your child."

"But it is, sir. I know, and Maria knows it is."

"Tell us how it came here. Until you can do that we cannot admit your claim for an instant. It is absurd—you must be mistaken."

"Absurd!" echoed Herbert.

"Tell me whose child it is, if it isn't mine?" retorted the man. "Do that, and I will go away. I don't care how it came here. I know it. I recognise it. It is my poor lost little boy, and I will have it."

The man grew more excited than before. Ho-

race was intensely annoyed. He turned to the woman. "You seem to have some sense," he said; "do you claim this child?"

She glanced at her husband and tears sprang into her eyes. "Yes, sir," she said, "I believe it is my child." The situation grew worse and worse. It was well for the boy that he had made such friends of Horace and Herbert or he must have been sacrificed forthwith, if only to rid the house of his self-styled father and mother.

As it was the Talberts temporised; they promised to consider the matter for a few days, and let Mr. Rawlings know the decision they might come to. Mr. Rawlings wrote on his business card the name of an hotel at which he was staying, and having again and again asserted that he would not be robbed of his refound son, at last, to the unspeakable relief of our friends, drove away in his gig.

Never had Horace and Herbert been placed in such a difficulty. They sat stroking their beards for at least half an hour, but could see no way out of it. The arrival of the child on that evening of last year was as nothing compared to the present dilemma. Then, had they chosen to use it, there was at least a short cut out of the difficulty; now there was none. The more they thought the more

improbable it seemed that these people could be the parents of the boy. And yet the man at least asserted that it was so, as if the matter was beyond doubt. The belief that the child was "some one's" child still clung to both Horace and Herbert. It seemed, moreover, an absolute insult that the child of such persons as Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings should have been sent to Hazlewood House. Why should they have been chosen out of all the world to have this child foisted upon them? Why did not the unknown sender return it to its rightful home? The whole claim was a mistake; whether wilful or accidental, it was a mistake. Fond as they had really grown of the little boy, the Talberts were far too just to think of wishing to keep him from his legitimate owners; but they had no intention of surrendering him to the first claimant.

Besides, what about Beatrice? what would she say? Beatrice, to whom the child seemed as the apple of her eye. Bitterly they blamed themselves for ever having yielded to her request that she might keep the foundling. But what was done, was done, and could not now be helped.

Horace wrote to Beatrice by the next post. He told her that some persons had called and claimed her boy. The whole thing, he said, was a great puzzle to him and to Herbert. They had deferred

their decision for a few days. If possible they would do nothing until her return.

Beatrice was alone when she read that letter. She turned deadly pale and seemed to gasp for breath. Then she rang the bell and ordered her things to be packed. At breakfast she quietly told Lady Clauson that she found she must return to Blacktown by the next train. She gave no reason for this abrupt departure, and her sudden determination annoyed Lady Clauson immensely. Sir Maingay said nothing. His daughter had long ago shown him she was entire mistress of her own actions.

"Mark my words," said Lady Clauson as soon as Beatrice had departed; "that girl will some day do something which will disgrace the family."

"Oh nonsense, my love," said Sir Maingay, who had now been married long enough to find out that his beautiful wife was not all his fancy had once painted her.

Beatrice reached Hazlewood House quite unexpected. The Talberts were out, so the girl ran straight to the nursery. "Where is my boy?" she cried, so vehemently that she startled Mrs. Miller, who knew nothing of the purport of the visit paid yesterday. The boy was there all safe, and Miss Clauson, without removing her outdoor garments,

hugged and caressed her pet until she was told that her uncles had come in. She went to them at once. They greeted her in astonishment.

"What have you done about those wretched people?" she asked quickly. "The people who claim my boy, I mean."

"My dear, we have done nothing as yet."

"You will not dream of giving him up?"

"I hope we shall not be obliged to."

"Listen, Uncle Horace," her cheek flushed as she spoke. "I will give him up to no one—no one at all."

"I am sure, my dear Beatrice, you will be entirely guided by us," said Horace.

"Of course she will," said Herbert, kindly. They must have been sanguine men, as the set of Miss Clauson's brow did not promise well for her submitting to guidance of any kind.

"I shall never give up that boy," she said in a firm voice, "until the person who claims it gives every proof that it is his. I would rather run away with him and hide myself."

Horace looked extremely shocked. "My dear Beatrice," he said, "it grieves us both to hear you talk so wildly. The child is a very nice child, but you speak of it as if it were of our own flesh and blood."

Beatrice did not reply to this; but the upshot was that the Talberts promised to write to Mr. Rawlings and say that they held his recognition of a child not seen for more than two years insufficient proof that it was his own, and in the absence of further evidence declined to entertain his claim. After this Beatrice left them, and for some time they mourned over this new and startling phase of demonstrativeness displayed by one of their own kin.

Two mornings afterwards Horace opened a letter addressed to him in clerkly writing. He read it, and it seemed as if his jaw was about to fall. In silence he handed the letter to Herbert. Herbert read it, and his face reflected his brother's emotion. One glance passed between them and they knew that they were of one mind. Horace turned to Beatrice.

"Beatrice," he said in a voice solemn as the grave, and in a manner decisive as the laws of the Medes and Persians, "that child must be given up."

She started, but before she could speak she heard Herbert's echo, equally solemn and decisive: "Beatrice, that child must be given up."

CHAPTER XVI.

A TAME SURRENDER.

THIS is a true copy of the letter which fell like a bombshell between the gentle and peace-loving Talberts.

"*Blacktown, Dec.* 31, 18—

"To the Messrs. Horace and Herbert Talbert.

"GENTLEMEN,—We have this morning been consulted by Mr. Rawlings with reference to your refusal to restore to him his child, John Rawlings, whom he lost about two years ago in a mysterious manner, and whom he has recently discovered to be living in your house.

"The circumstances as explained to us by our client tend to show that the child was left by some person unknown in a railway carriage; and that it eventually arrived at your house, where, we understand, it has since remained.

"Mr. Rawlings will call at your house on next Saturday afternoon at three o'clock, with a carriage, and we trust you will, without further opposition, allow the child to depart with him.

"In case you still refuse to give up the child, Mr. Rawlings has instructed us to take *immediate*

legal action to obtain possession of his son, and we are informed that proper legal proof as to the identity of the boy will be hereafter adduced.

"We are, gentlemen,

"Your obedient servants,

"BLACKETT AND WIGGENS."

No wonder that after reading the last paragraph, and realising the fact that the man with the terrible name meant to fight for his offspring, Horace ejaculated, "The child must be given up!" No wonder that Herbert in his turn echoed his brother's exclamation. Unimaginative as they were, a dreadful picture of the consequences of resistance fixed itself on the mental retina of each.

But Beatrice was by far the most agitated of the party. Her cheek grew white; the hand which she mechanically held out for the letter trembled. Herbert gave her the epistolary bomb-shell, and whilst she read it the two brothers gazed at each other in that sadly calm and gravely reflective way at times natural to men whose minds are made up that a particular path of duty must, at all costs, be trodden to the end. When such a gaze passes from man to man it strengthens the feet of each to tread the stony course.

Beatrice read the letter twice. Without a word

she returned it to Herbert; then she walked across the room to the fireplace and stood for some minutes tapping her foot upon the fender. Her back being turned to the Talberts they could not see the supreme emotion shown by her contracted brow and in every line of her set white face. Had they seen it they would have been more than surprised—they would have been shocked. Strong emotion was a thing to be shown by well-bred persons only under the most intense provocation. In this case it was uncalled-for.

Presently the girl turned to them. "You have quite made up your minds to yield to these people's threat?" she asked. There was a curious strained sound in her voice.

"We can do nothing else," answered Horace. Herbert nodded a sad assent to his brother's view of the case.

"Nothing else!" echoed Beatrice with a touch of scorn in her voice. "What right can these people have to the boy? It is not theirs. Uncle Horace, Uncle Herbert, you can remember how he was sent here. How beautifully dressed he was—how thoroughly cared for. Can you, can any one for a moment imagine him as belonging to such persons? What are they? Pork butchers, you said."

"Purveyors," interpolated Horace, who loved to be precise.

"How is it possible he can be their child?" urged Beatrice.

"People in any station of life may have children, my dear," said Herbert, uttering the truism like a newly-found proverb of Solomon.

"And," said Horace, speaking more to the point, "the broad fact remains that they claim the child, and are prepared to make that claim good before the magistrates."

The most accomplished jack-of-all-trades generally breaks down when he interprets law—Horace was no exception. Had he known that Messrs. Blackett and Wiggens could only obtain possession of their client's child by a writ of *habeas corpus* or some such mysterious operation in a civil court, he might have felt more inclined to disregard the threat of "immediate legal action." As it was, his ignorance of criminal law interpreted the vague threat as conveying the awful terrors of a magisterial summons. His mistake shows how much better it would be for the general public if they consulted solicitors in every emergency—and how much better for solicitors!

"Before the magistrates, my dear Beatrice,"

echoed Herbert, dutifully accepting his brother's version of the law.

"Tell them to do so—tell them to prove their right," said Beatrice.

The brothers held up their long shapely hands in horror. "My dear Beatrice," said Horace with the solemnity of a bishop rebuking a curate, "for heaven's sake be reasonable—we only ask you to be reasonable. How can we possibly appear before the bench and contest this claim? Fancy the talk—the ridicule! You must see the utter absurdity of your suggestion—the utter impossibility of our compliance."

"Yes, Beatrice, I am sure you must see it," said Herbert.

If Miss Clauson was misguided enough not to see the absurdity and impossibility of the course she wished her uncles to take, I am sure she stands alone in her darkness. Horace and Herbert haled before the county justices, charged by a purveyor of pork, named Rawlings, with unlawfully detaining the said purveyor's son and heir, would have made not only the hair of Oakbury but also the hair of a portion of Blacktown stand on end. Think how the families of position would have laughed! Think how annoyed and bitter the wiseacres who were sure the child was "somebody" would have felt

when the lowly parentage was revealed! And even if Mr. Rawlings failed to substantiate his claim there would be scandal. People would ask why the Talberts were so anxious to keep possession of this little stranger? Beatrice's strange fancy for the boy would not be a sufficient explanation. The Talberts knew the world and its pettiness and wicked tongue. Once they had braved it in deference to a whim of Beatrice's, but the matter was now far too serious to take a girl's whim into account. They saw that one course only was open to them. When Mr. Rawlings's carriage came to the door, little Harry must forthwith be placed in it.

But Miss Clauson still continued unreasonable. She even returned to the attack. "I do not see it at all," she said. "If this man laid claim to one of your fields you would not give it up."

"A field does not arrive unexpectedly in the middle of the night," said Horace—not humorously, but as one who states a simple fact.

"Take a better simile, my dear," said Herbert. "Suppose you picked up a sovereign in the street and a man came up and swore it was his. Although you might have every reason to doubt his assertion you would, I am sure, give it up in order to avoid unseemly dispute."

"I don't think I should," said Beatrice defiantly.

"Oh yes, my dear, you would," said Horace gravely.

"I am sure of it," added Herbert.

Beatrice did not pursue Herbert's ingenious argument further. "Nothing—no entreaty of mine will make you change your minds?" she asked. The brothers shook their heads sadly. It was painful to them to refuse her request, but their grave eyes looked into the distance and saw all the horrors which they imagined a contest with Mr. Rawlings would arouse. Beatrice knew that any further appeal would be waste of breath. "I must go and think," she said wearily, as she turned away from the arbiters of the boy's fate.

"I may say," said Horace, with a slight blush on his cheek, "that we both regret the necessity of this surrender. As a rule we are not fond of children, but your little friend has been very good, and had it been possible we would willingly have given him house-room until his future was assured."

Beatrice took his hand and pressed it. "Thank you," she said gratefully. Then she passed through the door which Herbert held open, an act of politeness which not even the relationship of uncle and niece, or the proverbial contempt bred by familiarity, allowed the Talberts to forget.

The brothers resumed their seats, and for a while silence reigned. The truth is they felt angry and annoyed, perhaps even self-reproachful. Impossible as it was that Mr. Rawlings's claims could be contested, both Horace and Herbert felt a sense of shame natural to any Englishman who finds himself compelled to yield by a mere threat. The wish to fight everything out to the bitter end made England what it is. Perhaps, after all, when they came to think of it, the Talberts were fonder of the child than they cared to own. At any rate, after a long brown study, Herbert, at least, showed signs of wavering.

"I suppose," he asked, as one seeking for information, "it would be out of the question for us to do as Beatrice wishes?"

Horace was equal to the occasion. "Quite out of question," he answered sternly. "We should be placed in a ridiculous position, and become the jest of the county."

They shuddered visibly at the thought and so far as the Talberts were concerned the boy's fate was settled. To become the jest of the county is too terrible! Country wit, as we all know, is so delicate, yet so sharp and pointed!

With minds ill-at-ease they sought distraction in their housekeeping. Although as a rule the "Tab-

bies" were just, if cheese-paring in their management,—not unreasonable, if exacting in their requirements,—to-day they drove the cook and poor Whittaker almost frantic, and set both wondering "whatever the masters were going to get to?"

In the mean time Beatrice had carried her white face to her own room. She locked the door, threw herself upon a couch, where for a long time she sat with her hands pressed against her brows. She did not weep, nor was her look that of one resigning herself to fate and getting ready to yield to the inevitable. It was rather that of one searching for and exploring every path which might possibly offer a way of escape from a difficulty. But it seemed as if every path she trod mentally resolved itself into a *cul de sac*, for the girl heaved a hopeless sigh and the tears at last began to force themselves through her half-closed lashes.

She rose, rang the bell, and gave orders for the boy to be brought to her. He soon ran into the room with the cry of delight with which he always greeted her. Miss Clauson took the little fellow on her lap, clasped him to her heart, stroked and curled his pretty, ruffled bright hair, called him by a thousand endearing names and strange diminutives, kissed him on his lips, his eyes, his neck, his dimpled arms and fat legs, and generally went

through the well-known ceremony of child-worship. It was clear that no legal menace, however dire, would make her acquiesce in the tame surrender of her pet contemplated by her uncles. Not one of her many and rather wild ejaculations so much as hinted at the possibility of an impending separation. In no sense were her caresses, some of which were tearful ones, intended as a farewell.

By and by, with a face even paler than before, Beatrice took the child by the hand and went downstairs. She paused for a second before the closed door of the room in which she had left her uncles. "I can see no other way. It must be done," she muttered. Then like one full of a solemn purpose she entered the room. Whatever she may have been about to do, the empty room seemed to give her a welcome respite. She gave a breath of relief. Nevertheless, it seemed that the respite was to be but short, for, after waiting a few minutes and finding neither Horace nor Herbert appear, she turned as if to go in search of them.

But at that moment her mood changed once more, or an alternative course at last presented itself. A tinge of colour leapt back to her cheek. With quick steps she led the boy away, and having consigned him to Mrs. Miller's care, again sought her own room, and again sat for a long time in

deep thought. "It is but a slender chance," she whispered, "but it can be tried. To-day is Thursday, and no steps are to be taken until Saturday."

After this she wrote a note to Sylvanus Mordle, asking him if he could come to the house and see her either that afternoon or early the next morning. She sent the note down to the village and then went in search of her uncles.

They looked at her rather timidly, perhaps conscience-stricken. They fancied she had come to renew her argument and offer up fresh entreaties. It may be they feared that in such an event they would be forced to yield, in spite of the consequences such an act of weakness must entail. But Beatrice did not reopen the attack. She quietly asked if she might have the clothes worn by the boy when he first disturbed the seclusion of Hazlewood House; which clothes, it may be remembered, were carefully stowed away by Horace in the big safe. As there appeared to be no harm in the gratifying of this request, the safe was unlocked, and a neat, brown paper parcel endorsed in Horace's long slim calligraphy given to the girl.

"You will not answer the solicitor's letter, I hope," she said.

"No; it needs no answer. The delivery of the boy will be answer enough."

In the afternoon Sylvanus trotted up on his tricycle. His face was radiant from the combined effects of the sharp, fresh air, the exercise, and the delight at having received such a summons from Miss Clauson. To-day he was leagues above his lugubrious name. He clapped his hands together, not so much for the purpose of promoting circulation as on account of the cheerful sound of the detonations made by the meeting palms. He wished old Whittaker a happy New Year in a way which clearly implied that happy years were the rule, sad ones the exception. Whittaker returned the greeting with due respect, and ventured to express his approval of Mr. Mordle's Christmas Day sermon. Then Mordle said something which made even Whittaker laugh. Miss Clauson heard the curate's brisk, crisp voice long before he was shown into the drawing-room.

He greeted her pleasantly, and learned that her uncles were out. As the Talberts always took their out-of-door exercise of an afternoon, this news was no surprise to him. Who shall say that Sylvanus did not time his call by their well-known clock-work habits? A *tête-à-tête* is often pleasant although the two heads harbour no thoughts save those of friendship.

"You want me," said Sylvanus. "Behold me. Here I am."

"I want you to do me a favour, so I ventured to write to you." Beatrice's words were conventional, but there was something in her manner which made the quick-witted curate wonder.

"Command me—in anything—everything—all." He spoke even more quickly and emphatically than was his wont. In his heart the good fellow fancied his aid was needed for something concerning Carruthers, whom he persisted in believing Beatrice loved. Nevertheless, he would willingly have done all he could to help to happiness the man who had taken every vestige of hope from him.

But the favour resolved itself into this. Would Mr. Mordle accompany Miss Clauson to-morrow morning to Blacktown? She had a private errand which took her to a part of the city of which she knew little or nothing. Sylvanus felt and expressed himself greatly honoured. At what time should he call for her? Would she walk or drive? Beatrice looked at him, and spoke very slowly and as if with an effort.

"I wish no one—not even my uncles—to know of this excursion," she said. "Would you meet me at the cross-roads at ten o'clock to-morrow morning? If I trespass on your time or good-nature please say so."

"Trespass! By no means. Ten o'clock. I shall be waiting for you."

Nevertheless Sylvanus was surprised, even troubled. To have refused to do Miss Clauson a service, whatever it might be, was of course out of the question, but being open as the day in all his comings and goings, he had a dislike to any proceedings which savoured of the mysterious. "Errand of charity, of course?" he said, making the questioning assertion not for curiosity but as a salve to his conscience.

"It is an errand of no evil," said Beatrice gravely. Her words satisfied Sylvanus as the words of a fair woman always satisfy the conscience of a man. The amount of conviction carried by beauty is truly wonderful.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CASE FOR KING SOLOMON.

At a few minutes past ten o'clock in the morning Sylvanus Mordle, who for some quarter of an hour had been waiting at the cross-roads as patiently as the finger-post itself, saw Beatrice coming towards him. He hastened to meet her, and his sharp eyes at once noticed that she looked worn and weary. Had he known that she had spent a sleepless night,

this would have caused him no surprise. The two walked on until they reached the outskirts of the city. Here, by Beatrice's command, the curate hailed a cab. "Where shall we drive to?" he asked.

"There, if you please," said Beatrice, handing him a paper. Mordle stared, and could scarcely repress a cry of surprise. The paper bore the words, "The Cat and Compasses, Market Lane." He wondered what in the world Miss Clauson could want at a fifth-rate Blacktown inn. However, he gave the order, and in due time the cab drew up at its euphonical destination.

The "Cat and Compasses" was an inn which had seen better, much better days, on the strength of which it still ventured to call itself a family and commercial hotel. Perhaps it spoke the truth; perhaps its assertion was but a laudable evidence of a desire to regain its former status. It stood in a narrow street very near to Blacktown market, and, judging by external appearance, was the very last place at which either a family, or even one of those dashing representatives of commerce of our day, would dream of staying. It boasted a billiard-room built over a stable at the back, and approached by a step-ladder. Saving this, its attractions were few, beyond the gay-looking bottles and neat little kegs

ranged temptingly on shelves above a battered but bright pewter counter—a cheerful gauntlet to be run by all who entered the house itself. What could bring Miss Clauson to such a place?

Simply this: the widowed landlady of the house was an old friend of Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings. These respectable people were staying with her, and Beatrice had learnt the address given to her uncles. Her business was to see Mr. Rawlings.

As the cab stopped Sylvanus, who knew nothing of the claim made on little Harry's person, looked inquiringly at his companion. He saw that Beatrice had at a glance taken in the rather disreputable look of the "Cat and Compasses," which was doubtless unfairly enhanced by a man with a sodden, gin-besieged face, who leant against the door-post smoking a short pipe. He saw, moreover, that Beatrice appeared agitated. "You were right not to come alone," he said.

"Will you step in and ask if a lady can see a Mrs. Rawlings, who is staying there?" Mordle obeyed.

Beatrice drew down her veil, and leaned back in the cab. She closed her eyes as if for the moment to shut out her surroundings. "It must be done!" she murmured. Her eyes were still closed when she heard Mordle, his clear accents just

tempered by surprise, saying that the person she wanted was in the house and would see her. Beatrice moved as if to leave the cab. The curate kept the door closed.

"Miss Clauson," he said, "can I not do your errand for you? This seems scarcely the place for you to enter."

He spoke more gravely than usual. His mind was picturing the consternation into which Horace and Herbert would be thrown did they but know that their niece was visiting such a place as this. He felt he was betraying a trust, and until he could assure himself that the end more than justified the means would be ill-at-ease.

"No," said Beatrice, "I alone can do it. Please do not follow me; but I should be glad if you will wait for me."

Very reluctantly he opened the cab-door, and with many misgivings watched Beatrice go past the sodden-faced man, who cast after her a look of maudlin approval; he watched her go past the coloured bottles and the pewter counter, and disappear from sight. As she vanished, Sylvanus, who was shrewd enough to feel that it would be moral ruin for a clergyman, especially one who was but a curate, to be seen at such an hour of the morning hanging about the door of such a tavern, ensconced

himself in the depths of the cab, and waited and wondered. He honestly believed that whatever might be the mission which brought Beatrice to such a place, its object was perfectly pure and womanly. Yet he was unhappy, and felt guilty. Horace and Herbert sat heavily on his conscience. Charitable as he knew them to be, prompted by charity as he persuaded himself was Beatrice's unknown errand, he was fully aware that no milk of human kindness possessed by the Talberts would induce them to consent to their niece's exercising the sacred quality in such dingy purlieus, or under the roof of such a questionable establishment as the "Cat and Compasses." The limits of the charitable obligations of Hazlewood House were strictly defined by the boundaries of Oakbury parish.

At the end of the gleaming pewter counter Beatrice encountered the widowed landlady, whose frame, expansive after the manner of widowed landladies, filled up the narrow passage. She eyed Miss Clauson curiously, and then conducted her to a snug parlour at the back of the bar. Inn parlours of this sort are always cosy and warm. This was no exception to the rule. A cosy, low room, and not without cheerful ornaments, seeing that it boasted a large tea-tray inlaid with mother-of-pearl, several coloured prints, and a handsomely-framed

copper-plate written document, which proclaimed to all who cared to read it that the deceased proprietor was a member of the Ancient Order of Odd-fellows.

Beatrice noticed none of these artistic embellishments. She took the chair which was offered her, and, without raising her veil, awaited the appearance of Mrs. Rawlings. As no woman with any pretensions to respectability and solvency would think of facing an unknown visitor without some little smoothing of plumes and adjustment of attire, Miss Clauson had to wait several minutes for the desired audience. At last she heard the door open, and with a stifled sob she rose, turned, and faced the new-comer.

Mrs. Rawlings's good-natured, round, commonplace face wore an expression of wonderment. She saw that her visitor was of a class different from that which usually honoured her with a morning call. As a tribute to Miss Clauson's undeniably lady-like appearance, the good woman's greeting, which began with a nod, ended in something like a curtsey.

"Please be seated, miss," she said. "I hear you want to speak to me."

"Yes," said Beatrice, in a low but clear voice. "I wish to speak to you about the child which you

claim as yours. I wish to hear what you have to say."

The woman's face grew grave. "Ah," she said, "I must send for my husband. He's managing the business."

Beatrice made an imperious gesture of dissent. "What I have to say must be said to you. Kindly see that we speak without interruption." Mrs. Rawlings settled back in her chair rather sullenly, and eyed her veiled visitor with increased curiosity. Suddenly Beatrice again spoke.

"Tell me," she said, in tones of strong reproach, and, perhaps unwisely, scorn—"tell me why you dare to claim as your own a child whom you saw for the first time a few days ago?"

Mrs. Rawlings seemed troubled. She could not see her visitor's eyes, but had the uncomfortable feeling that they were gazing sternly at her, as if striving to read the truth in her perturbed features.

"We lost a little boy," she faltered out, "a dear little boy of that age. My man is certain this is ours."

"But you—you are not certain. A man may make a mistake as to his own child, but not a woman. The mother does not forget her child, or believe the child of a stranger to be her own."

"My man is so certain," repeated Mrs. Rawlings, "he must be right. Poor fellow, ever since our boy was lost he has been seeking him, high and low. It has driven him all but mad at times. Now he has found the child, and means to have him." She spoke the last sentence somewhat defiantly.

"He will never have him," said Beatrice, slowly. "Listen to me. There is no chance of your obtaining that boy. His mother knows in whose hands he is. If your claim is pressed, proof as to whose the child really is will be forthcoming. The production will cause pain and grief, but that will be borne, if needful. See here"—she drew from her pocket the label which had been cut off the child's cape—"the person who has a right to that child must produce the half of the card which fits this. When wanted it can be produced."

"I know nothing about cards and proofs," said the woman, whose understanding could not, perhaps, grasp the ingenuity of the device. "All I know is this, miss: my husband swears it is our boy, and I believe him, poor man. Sore enough he has grieved for two years—never been the same man since."

"You do not believe him," said Beatrice, in the same deliberate way, "but for the sake of setting his mind at rest, you humour his delusion, and are willing to rob another woman. You seem to be a

kind woman, yet you are ready to work irretrievable harm to another."

"I mean no harm to any one, miss. If it shouldn't be my child, the mother can't be of much account who could desert a pretty little dear like that. But there, I've listened too long, and perhaps said more than I ought. If you like to see my husband, I'll send for him."

Mrs. Rawlings rose as if to terminate the audience. Beatrice also rose and faced her. She threw up her veil, and for the first time during the interview showed her face to her companion.

"No," she said, with strange vehemence; "I have more, much more, to say to you. Look me in the face, and feel sure that I am speaking the truth. What if I tell you that I know the mother of this child—know why it was sent to Hazlewood House —know that if forced to do so the mother will claim it publicly—will face whatever the shame, rather than yield it to another. Will these things have weight with you, and make you persuade your husband to let the matter rest?"

Her impassioned manner had its effect upon her listener. Mrs. Rawlings fidgeted about, and her round eyes, which hitherto had rested wonderingly on Beatrice's face, were cast down.

"It's no use," she muttered, shaking her head.

"Not a bit of use. He has set his heart on the boy. He'll say it's only a trick."

"Then I have yet more to say. Look at me again, and listen. Put yourself in my place, and realise what you compel me to do. I tell you the child is mine—it is mine. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Rawlings shook her head feebly.

"It is mine," repeated Beatrice. "I am its mother. Do I speak clearly enough? That boy is my son. I bore him in trouble and in secrecy. Now will you or your husband dare to lay claim to him—dare to swear it belongs to you? Answer me!"

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear, dear!" ejaculated Mrs. Rawlings. Beatrice's face was pale as death. She breathed quickly as one in pain. Now that her hand was forced, now that the guarded secret of her life was wrested from her, she seemed to speak like one who having told the worst cares little what follows.

"Save myself and one other no one knows of its birth. I loved it and longed to have it ever with me. But for years I scarcely dared to see it. Then came a chance. I schemed so that it might come to me and be always with me, and yet no one need know it was my very own. I injured no one by so doing. I had my child, and could love

it and care for it. I was all but happy. And now for what can be of no benefit to you, you will force me to tell my tale to the world or part with my child. Yet you are a woman, and must have a woman's heart!"

She looked at Mrs. Rawlings, and saw that tears were in her eyes.

"I believe you are kind," continued Beatrice in a softer voice. "You have forced me to tell you all. But I believe you will keep my secret and help me to keep it." She did not mean to sue, nevertheless there was an imploring tone in her voice. Mrs. Rawlings clasped her plump hands together; the tears streamed down her cheeks. In spite of years of practice in plaiting up those mysterious white integuments whose fanciful shapes adorn shops where pork is sold, the worthy woman was still humane at heart.

"Oh my poor young lady! My poor young lady!" she cried. "You so young, so proud-looking, so beautiful! To be led astray! Oh dear! oh dear! What villains men are, both high and low!"

Miss Clauson flushed to the roots of her hair. She seemed about to speak, but checked herself. "You are satisfied now?" she asked after a pause.

"Oh yes, miss. Oh, I am so sorry for you.

You were right to trust me. Not a word shall pass my lips."

"But your husband?"

"Oh dear! oh dear! I must do the best I can. I must tell him it is not ours. He will be so unhappy. He's a good man and a kind husband, but rather excitable. I assure you, miss, he was fully convinced that sweet little boy was his. I own I wasn't, but I humoured him seeing the thought made him so happy. Any way I would have loved the boy like my own. Now I promise you there shall be no more trouble. But my poor man, he will be disappointed."

"Will any sum of money——" began Beatrice rather timidly.

"Oh no, miss. Although Rawlings has neglected business dreadfully for the last two years, and his brother is grumbling, we are fairly well-to-do people with a tidy bit saved. Oh no, my man is single-eyed. He only wanted his boy."

"How was your child lost?" asked Beatrice.

Mrs. Rawlings looked rather confused. "I can't help believing, miss, that the poor little fellow was drowned and never found. But Rawlings, he won't have it so. He says he was stolen, and we shall find him some day."

After this Miss Clauson thanked her hostess with

grave dignity. Then she dropped her veil and, attended by Mrs. Rawlings, went back to the cab and Sylvanus. She had gained her end, but at a price only known to herself. What it had cost her to reveal the secret of her life to that strange woman can scarcely be over-estimated. Such was her feeling of degradation that she almost wished that her uncles had been in the room when yesterday she went with the child in her hand to tell them what she had to-day told Mrs. Rawlings. "And after all," she murmured with a bitter smile on her face, "it is but staving off the crash which must come sooner or later." Here she sighed involuntarily. Mordle's quick ear caught the sound. "Nothing unpleasant happened, I hope?" he asked.

"My business was not of the pleasantest nature, but I accomplished it successfully," replied Beatrice.

He said no more. By her desire she was set down at one of the principal shops in Blacktown, an emporium of articles of feminine need into which Mordle could not venture to accompany her. She thanked him for his services, and he knew that those thanks were a dismissal. He strode back to Oakbury looking very thoughtful; indeed it was not until he was well into his own parish that he remembered the necessity of resuming his usual cheerful air. "It must have been charitable," he

muttered. "But why the secrecy? Why the 'Cat and Compasses?'"

Saturday came. All that morning, the busiest of the week, Horace and Herbert were fidgety and uncomfortable. Long before the hour fixed by Messrs. Blackett and Wiggens for the appearance of their client's carriage, the brothers were glancing down the drive. Miss Clauson, however, appeared calm and at her ease. Her woman's instinct told her that all danger from the claimants was at an end. About two o'clock Horace turned to her. "My dear," he said, "has Mrs. Miller made any preparation for the child's departure?"

"None whatever. He will not be sent for. It was but an idle threat."

Horace and Herbert exchanged glances. They knew it was no idle threat, but they little knew how the fulfilment had been averted.

Three o'clock came—four—five o'clock; but no carriage, no Rawlings, no Blackett, no Wiggens. Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday passed without any sign or manifestation of hostility. The Talberts were then bound to confess that their niece had judged aright.

"Beatrice appears to be remarkably clear-sighted," said Horace.

"Remarkably so," answered Herbert.

But had Sylvanus Mordle, who spent the evening with them, committed a breach of faith and mentioned his excursion with Miss Clauson, the brothers might have suspected they had credited their niece with a quality to which she had no title.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SWEETS OF LIBERTY.

"Oh, Liberty! thou goddess heavenly bright! Profuse of bliss and pregnant with delight." Every bard has sung the joys of liberty; every writer has said his say upon her glories. Patriots have died for her, and statesmen—modern ones especially—have made her a convenient stalking-horse. The subject being such a stock one, and apt quotations so plentiful, there is no need to dilate upon the frame of mind in which Mrs. Miller's acquaintance, Mr. Maurice Hervey, late No. 1080, found himself when Portland prison at length discontinued its ungrudging and machine-like hospitality and restored him to the outer world, a free man save for the formality of once a month reporting himself to the police, and that general suspicious surveillance which is so irksome to the usually modest and retiring nature of a ticket-of-leave man.

The "goddess heavenly bright" showed her face, the first time for some years, to Maurice Hervey on the very day when Miss Clauson and Sylvanus Mordle went to Blacktown.

Mrs. Miller, who had manifested so keen an interest in the felon's enlargement, remained in complete ignorance of the happy event. This was due to no omission on her part. She had written twice to the governor of Portland, begging that the date of the convict's release might be made known to her. The letters were dated not from Oakbury, but from some place in London. The first letter was duly acknowledged, and the information vouchsafed that the date could not be exactly fixed. To the second letter she received no reply. The reason for such apparent discourtesy was this:—

The day of the man's emancipation was drawing very near, so he was told that his friend had written, and he was asked if he wished to be sent to London to meet her? He cast down his eyes and in a respectful way stated that he was sorry to say that he attributed his present shameful position to certain evil counsel which the writer had given him, and which he had followed. He did wish to be sent to London, but would rather avoid this woman than seek her. After this avowal Mrs. Miller's letter remained unanswered.

He was an educated villain who had been sentenced to five years penal servitude for uttering forged bills. Like most such men, who are sent into seclusion for the good of the community, Maurice Hervey was able to realise, without such severe treatment as was needed to convince the Apostle Paul, that kicking against pricks is foolishness. He had been ordered to pay society a certain debt. Misbehaviour meant that the debt would be exacted to the uttermost farthing; whereas good conduct would in time lighten the obligation and induce his creditor to accept a handsome composition. So he did to the best of his ability such work as was allotted to him. He was too clever to attempt the elbow-worn trick of interesting the chaplain by a pretended conversion. He sagely reflected that chaplains must by this time have grown wide-awake. But he wore a contented inoffensive look, spoke civilly to his gaolers, complained of nothing and gave no trouble. It was only in the seclusion of his circumscribed cell of corrugated iron that No. 1080 scowled, grated his teeth, and clenched his hands. It was only there that while his heart craved for personal freedom, his lips noiselessly framed bitter curses and vows of vengeance.

So it is that if upon his return to freedom Mr.

Hervey had given his experience of penal servitude to the daily papers, his description of the punishment of bread and water diet, dark cells, and that humiliating exercise with the crank, known as "grinding the air," would have had no first-hand value.

Before leaving Portland he was told that the "Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society" would doubtless do something for him. He expressed his gratitude for the information, but added that unless from disuse his right hand had lost its cunning, he could earn an honest—he emphasised the word—livelihood without difficulty. He had been an artist, and could again pursue that craft under a new name. During his detention he had given his janitors proof of his graphic abilities, by the graving of sundry slates with complicated and not inartistic designs. These works of art are still shown to visitors to the prison as curiosities.

So, practically a free man, Maurice Hervey stood in the streets of London at four o'clock on the second day of the new year. There was little about him to attract attention. By a merciful and sensible dispensation, during the three months prior to his emancipation, a convict's hair is left to nature, so that in these days of military crops, Mr. Hervey's head, which no longer resembled a Fitzroy storm-

drum, was not a signal of danger. The suit of clothes which replaced the durable prison dress was rough and ill-fitting, but not such as to create remark. In London that night there must have been hundreds of thousands of respectable men who looked neither better nor worse than Maurice Hervey.

Free at last! Free to turn where he liked, and, within the limits of the law, do as he liked; in splendid health; in the prime of manhood. Free to redeem or cancel the past by honest work, or by dishonesty sink lower and lower in the future. In his pocket the sum of five pounds seventeen shillings and sixpence, the result of years of self-enforced good conduct and unavoidable hard labour. The fingering of this money gave him a new, or at least awoke a dormant sensation. It was more than four years since his hands had touched a coin of the realm. Think of that and realise what penal servitude means.

The first use he made of his liberty and money was characteristic, and I fear may awaken indulgent sympathy in the minds of the majority of man- (not woman-) kind. He went into a tobacconist's and bought a ninepenny cigar. He lit it, sat down upon a chair in the shop, and for some minutes smoked in blissful contented silence. The shopkeeper eyed his customer narrowly. His general appearance,

especially the look of his hands, did not seem compatible with what the tradesman called "a ninepenny smoke gent." Hervey caught the man's eyes fixed on his hands. He himself glanced at them with a look of disgust and a muttered curse. Years of turf-carrying and digging and delving for Portland stone play havoc with a gentleman's hands. Hervey's nails were broken, blunted and stunted; his fingers were thickened and hardened. Altogether his hands were such as a person solicitous as to the refinement of his personal appearance would prefer to keep in his pockets.

There were other actions which showed the ticket-of-leave man to be possessed of a fastidious nature. The first enthralling solemnity of the refound enjoyment of good tobacco having passed off, he left the shop and went in search of a ready-made clothing establishment. Here he bought a shirt and collar, a pair of shining boots, a hat, gloves, and a cheap suit which for a few days would hang together and present an appearance almost fashionable. He asked permission to change his apparel on the premises. Then having had a brown paper parcel made of the suit presented to him by a generous government, he went his way, no doubt much relieved by the amelioration of his external condition.

After a few more purchases needed by a gentleman for his toilet, he found his money had dwindled down to very little. He had however enough left to buy a shiny black bag. Into this he tumbled his parcels, and hailing a hansom, paid his last shilling to be conveyed to the door of a well-known hotel. A luxurious dog this convict!

He engaged a bedroom. He ordered a dinner of which even Horace and Herbert might have approved. He rang for hot water, and spent half an hour soaking his hardened and disfigured hands. He scowled as he realised the painful fact that hundreds of gallons of hot water and months of time must be expended before these badly-used members in any way resumed their original appearance. Then, without a shilling in his pocket, he went to his dinner, with which he drank a bottle of champagne. It is clear that Mr. Hervey, late 1080, had liberal views as to the treatment due to himself. He had, moreover, a lot of leeway to make up.

He spent the evening smoking the hotel cigars, and drinking the hotel whisky and water. Pleasant as these occupations were, he retired to rest early. Whilst he had been soaking his hands, he had cast longing eyes upon the beauties of the white-covered bed, and had mentally contrasted its soft charms

with the asperities of the strip of sacking which had for so long been his resting-place. Sweet, truly sweet, are the uses of adversity when they teach a man to enjoy the simple comforts of life as Maurice Hervey that night enjoyed his bed. He revelled in the clean white sheets, he nestled on the soft mattress and yet softer pillows. The profusion of blankets filled his soul with a rapturous warmth. And as he fully realised the contrast between the innocent luxury he was enjoying and the discomforts of an iron cell eight feet by four, he vowed a very proper vow, that no ill-advised conduct of his own should force him to renew his acquaintance with prison fare and discipline. The love of luxury has saved many a man from going wrong.

"Besides," he murmured, as he sank off to sleep, "there is no need for foolery of that kind. I am master of the situation. I can eat, drink, and be merry for the rest of my life." There are many men who would sleep the sounder had they such a thought to rock them.

In the morning, after breakfast, it occurred to Hervey that a moneyless man staying at an hotel is in rather a precarious position. Pleasant as was his newly-found liberty, there was work to be done before he could with a clear conscience enjoy it. So he sallied forth, trudged through a number of

streets, and at last reached a quiet back road full of unpretending little houses. At one of these houses he inquired for a Miss Martin, who had lodged there some four or five years ago. Miss Martin, he was informed, had left ever so long—left without giving an address. Hervey's heart grew sick. In his haste to once more taste the luxuries of life he had been too precipitate. He knew that unless he could find the person he wanted, it would have been better for him to have kept his good conduct money intact.

The woman of the house, who noticed his dismay, added that the shop at the corner might know what had become of Miss Martin; so to the shop he went. He was in luck. He learned that his friend lived about a mile away; moreover, that she was now Mrs. Humphreys. As he heard this supplementary piece of news, the man laughed so curiously that the shopwoman eyed him askance.

He walked to the new address, that of another little house in another quiet street. He knocked. A good-looking, respectable young woman, carrying a baby, and followed by a toddling child, opened the door. She gave a low cry, and staggered back against the wall. Hervey raised his hat with mock politeness, and without invitation entered the house. The woman called to some one, who came and re-

lieved her of her children. She then opened the door of a sitting-room, into which she followed her visitor. Hervey threw himself on a chair, and looked at the woman with a satirical smile. As yet not a word had passed between them. The man was the first to break the silence.

"Well, Fanny," he said mockingly, "so you are married, and have forgotten me?"

"No; I am trying to forget you." She spoke bitterly.

"And you can't. That's a compliment, considering the years of separation."

The woman looked at him in the face. "Maurice," she said, "I am married. I married a kind, true man, who loves me, and works for me and for our children. He knew a great deal, not all about my past, yet he took me and trusts me. You will sneer when I tell you I am trying to be a good woman and a good wife. You always sneered at anything good. But, Maurice, for the sake of what we were once to each other, spare me now. Let me live in peace, and see you no more."

She spoke in solemn earnest, such earnestness that the man's light laugh seemed discordant. "My dear girl," he said, "I have no wish to tempt your feet from the paths of domestic virtue—no wish to harm you. I have finer fish to fry. But you may

remember that when certain circumstances rendered it imperative—curse it! I can speak plainly to you —when I learnt that the warrant was out, when I knew that the game was up, I placed a little packet in your fond hands to keep until better times. Where is it?"

The woman flushed, and for a moment did not answer. Her prayer for mercy had been genuine: her wish to see him no more an honest utterance; but years ago she had given this man all a woman has to give—given it without consideration, without price. And now, so far as he was concerned, the only memory of the past which linked them together was but of a certain thing left in her charge.

He saw the flush, saw the hesitation, and, of course, attributed both to the wrong motive. His brow grew black. "By G—d!" he cried; "if it is not forthcoming——"

She burst into tears. "Wait," she said, quitting the room abruptly, and leaving her visitor in dire suspense. In a few minutes she returned and handed him a small sealed packet.

"There it is—just as you gave it to me that night," she said. "Many a time when I've been hard pressed and did not know where to turn to for a shilling I tried to persuade myself that you

meant me to use it in case of need. But I knew you too well, Maurice—I knew you too well!"

Hervey paid no heed to her last words, the scorn conveyed by which should have brought the blood to the cheek of any man of decent feelings. He tore the parcel open. It contained a gold watch and chain, two valuable diamond rings, and about a hundred and fifty sovereigns. He placed the watch in his fob, then tried to draw the rings on his fingers. Neither would pass over his enlarged knuckles, so with a curse he shovelled them along with the gold into his pocket. The woman watched him sadly.

"Thank you, my dear," he said airily. "I knew I could trust you. By-the-bye, perhaps you're hard up. Have some—I can get plenty more." He held out some gold to her.

"Not a farthing. Your gold would burn me."

"Will you give me a kiss for the sake of old times? Fancy! it is more than four years since my lips have touched a woman's."

She made an emphatic gesture of dissent. "It would be well for some women," she said, "if your lips had never touched theirs."

He laughed an unpleasant laugh. "Well, good-bye then, if we are not to rake up old fires. Remember me to your respectable husband. Keep

yourself unspotted from the world, and train up your children in the way they should go. Farewell."

He swung out of the house whistling a merry tune in vogue when his incarceration began. "Now," he said, "that I have money enough to last a long time, I can make my own terms. Grim want won't push me into a corner. Now, you jade, I'll make you bend your proud knees!"

He grated his strong teeth and stamped his foot —the latter so violently and viciously that a timid old gentleman who was close by him started off at an accelerated pace in the direction of a distant policeman.

Hervey hung about London for a few days. He made considerable additions to his wardrobe, was an excellent customer of the hotel, he patronised several theatres, and generally enjoyed himself. He was not altogether idle, part of his time being taken up in making a series of inquiries which it took some trouble to get answered. At last he learned what he wanted to know. "So near!" he muttered. "I feared I should have to look out of England." Forthwith he paid his hotel bill, and carrying with him the respect of the proprietor, left the house. Evening found him in comfortable quarters in the smoky old city known as Blacktown.

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